

SCORNED HEIR

SF
SCORNED
FATE
series



VICTORIA PAIGE



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About

She's about to fake-date the bad boy of Manhattan.

Seraphina Moretti is half-in-love with her best friend's older brother.

An arranged marriage is in her future and the groom is not the object of her affection.

But then the devil of Wall Street whispers in her ear.

Telling her to follow her heart, that the unrequited love she's feeling is reciprocated.

She just has to use a ploy as old as time.

Jealousy.

Matteo De Lucci will use subterfuge to get what he wants.

And what he wants is to prevent a possible union between two families that would make a powerful organization unstoppable.

The key was through Sera's affection for his business partner.

And fake-dating Sera is a way where everyone good wins.

When the enemy makes a bold move, the lines between what is real and what is fake start to blur.

Sera begins to crave the man she shouldn't be falling for.

And Matteo starts to feel possessive over a woman who loves another.

When all their families weigh in, marriage between them might be the next step.

But would it be fake or real?

Author's Note

I've taken liberties in renaming the New York Five Families and the Chicago Outfit, creating my own world and rules. A family tree is provided in the back of the book for reference, but it is my intent for the reader to "know" the characters as they come on the page. This is not a dark romance but is morally gray. It does contain profanity, explicit scenes, and sensitive content.

For a more complete list, click [here](#).

Everyone deserves hope and something special in life.

Fictional characters remind me of this.

CHAPTER

One

SERA

“Bored yet?”

I slid a glance at my friend Ivy Wu. The raucous festivities celebrating Wheeler Corp’s partnership with Conte Enterprise receded while her brother gave a speech.

Ivy Wu *was* Wheeler Corp. Or rather, her older brother, Daniel, was CEO, and she was its social media face. I met her at the Stanford School of Business, where our rivalry for top honors later transformed into mutual admiration and finally into friendship. We became roommates by the second year.

It didn’t hurt that I harbored a giant crush on her brother.

I sipped my champagne, my gaze riveted on Daniel. “Oh, I don’t know. The view isn’t bad.”

When it was just the two of us, I had no filter about letting her know that I found her brother attractive. The teasing went along the lines of “we’re already friends, why couldn’t we be in-laws?” Around her brother though, I had the good sense to hide it, partly because of pride, but mostly because I valued Ivy’s friendship. It was an unspoken boundary of our sisterhood.

Daniel treated me as an extension of his baby sister anyway.

“Seriously, aren’t you over your crush yet?” In return, she teased me often about the first time I laid eyes on her brother.

The “Swoony-Daniel” incident in question was when Ivy and I decided to become roomies. Despite having an empire to run, he took time out of his schedule to supervise his sister’s move into an apartment. Apparently I had a weakness for a man who doted on his sister.

And even if Daniel was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen, my crush on him went beyond the physical. Watching him as he gave his speech, I found him commanding without being arrogant, graced with a humility that I found appealing, charismatic, and admirable.

But a crush was all it could be. Keeping discussions of my feelings for him lighthearted was a form of survival.

A mitigation of future heartache.

An arranged marriage loomed in my immediate future, tightening the noose on my carefree days.

The older gentleman standing on the stage beside Daniel was my godfather, Gustavo Conte. Conte Enterprise was the biggest exporter of olive oil from Turkey and Italy. But more than being my godfather, he was the uncle of my prospective groom.

Nothing short of Daniel declaring undying love to me would sway me, Seraphina Moretti, from fulfilling my duty to the Moretti crime family.

“And to my sister, Ivy,” Daniel called. The spotlight swung our way, blinding us. We groaned and shielded our eyes. “Beside her is the lovely Sera Moretti, a longtime friend of the family.”

“Oh God,” Ivy muttered while doing a queen’s wave to the crowd she couldn’t see. “I told them never to use that harsh light on us. It washes out our color.”

“I’m sure your followers will know it’s the lighting,” I said. Ivy had an impressive following on social media which was instrumental to the success of their luxury boutique.

After Daniel finished his speech, he and Gustavo made their way to us amidst the crowd’s roar of approval and clapping. Wheeler Corp provided the cash flow and logistical

expertise that would bring my godfather's olive oil business to an epic global reach. All financial sectors had eyes on this partnership, which would mean unparalleled growth to Conte's pipeline of the product into North America and Asia.

What wasn't visible to the public was the positioning of chess pieces in the underworld given the potential merger between our families.

"Sera." Gustavo clasped my hands and kissed my cheek. "You grow more beautiful each time I see you."

"Zio Gus, how are you?"

"Getting older," he said. "I haven't seen you in months. You should visit our olive oil farms. We've totally renovated its equipment and process."

"So I've heard." I couldn't help the excitement in my voice. My thesis for my business degree was on the modernization of olive oil production. "No objection from our old-school friends?"

Friends was putting it mildly. There was objection from the adherers to the old methods of hand-pickers and granite stone presses.

"Resistance is dying out." He waggled his brows and his laughter held a hint of pride. "The projected profits with the new equipment is enough proof."

Noticing the lack of input from the other two, I realized Daniel had ventured off. Ivy was frowning into her phone, but somehow over the years, we'd developed some kind of sixth sense and she looked up.

"How long are you staying here, Mr. Conte?" Ivy asked distractedly.

It was hard not to wince because it wasn't a secret that Gustavo was returning to Italy in four days.

"Monday." His attention was not on Ivy but over my shoulder, probably looking for her brother.

"You'll have to excuse Daniel, he had to take care of something."

Gustavo's face grew troubled. "Hopefully it's nothing that will distract him from our partnership."

"I'm sure it won't," Ivy replied, but I knew her well enough to detect the slight doubt in her tone.

My godfather's eyes returned to me. "I need to mingle with the other guests." He gave me a kiss on the cheek and a hug and then shook Ivy's hand. "Great job with the event, Miss Wu."

When Gustavo disappeared into the crowd, I turned to Ivy. "Daniel is spread too thin."

"That's nothing new."

True. Her brother was a known workaholic.

Ivy caught the attention of a roaming waiter. "Is that the Four Seasons' virgin punch?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She exchanged our empty flutes with two colorful glasses of the bright yellow and red fruity drink and guided me to an abandoned high top.

But I was still offended for my godfather. I didn't want to let this go. This was such an important occasion for Gustavo, and though admittedly my godfather was more sensitive than most to the smallest slights, even I thought it was disrespectful of Ivy's brother to disappear right after making that big partnership speech. "What happened to Daniel?"

"Matteo De Lucci gatecrashed our event."

CHAPTER

Two

SERA

“Just stay with us at the penthouse,” Ivy offered.

We were waiting in front of the Four Seasons hotel for our rides. Tony, my driver and bodyguard, couldn’t find his way out of the mess that was New York traffic. It was his idea to drop me off and pick me up again.

I wish I could have stayed in a Manhattan hotel. But the family was in the middle of a turf war with the Russian mafia and my uncle Luca, the current boss of the Moretti crime family, insisted I used our Brooklyn brownstone since it had security installed and it would be easier to accommodate my bodyguards. Given the tight security at the party with several high-profile entrepreneurs in attendance, my uncle relented about not having my bodyguards with me for the duration of the event.

Daniel pulled up in the latest model Audi SUV.

Ivy opened the door and ducked her head in. “Can Sera stay with us tonight? Her driver is stuck in traffic.”

“I’m not sure Luca...” His eyes narrowed past my shoulder.

Instinct had me spinning around with a feeling like I was about to get ambushed.

Ambushed by irritation, apparently.

“Matteo.” I nodded briefly. I didn’t wait for him to acknowledge me. I was still annoyed at him for marring the event tonight for my godfather and friends. And this De Lucci was living up to his name as the Raptor of Wall Street, especially with his singular focus when he was after something. In this case, and according to Ivy, it was a massive real estate deal that he and Daniel were working on and neither man was in agreement on who should take the lead.

I stepped aside just in case he wanted a last word with Daniel, but warm fingers grasped my elbow, halting my sideways motion.

“Trouble with your ride?” Matteo asked.

“We got this, De Lucci,” Daniel snapped before awarding me a winning smile. “Sure, you can come with us. You know I’ll always make room for you.”

Ivy whipped her head toward her brother. They exchanged a look.

Yes, Ivy. Even I was baffled. Daniel was nice to me, but that was *too* charming.

“I really want my own bed tonight,” I blurted.

“Then the matter is settled.” Matteo’s hand tightened around my elbow and started leading me away.

“Wait a minute.” My head was spinning. I was still processing Daniel’s reaction and Matteo’s offer...he was offering to take me home, right?

“Don’t fight it,” Matteo said by my ear. “You want Wu to woo you. He needs competition.”

“What are you talking about?” Instead of balking, I huffed a laugh. “That was a lame play on words.” But when I realized he was dragging me straight to his car—a slate gray Jaguar—I protested, “I didn’t agree to go with you.”

“Call your driver and tell him to turn around.” He opened the passenger door.

I dug in my heels physically and figuratively. “Has anyone told you you’re bossy?”

“All the time.” A ghost of a smile played on his lips.

“Look. I’ve had enough dealings with bossy men like my uncle. I don’t want to add you to the list as well.”

Leaving the door open, Matteo rounded the Jag and slid behind the wheel. “Didn’t figure you for a chicken, Sera. Ivy saw you leave with me. I’m not likely to murder you and bury your body somewhere. Besides, I value my life.”

“You’re scared of Luca?”

“Hell no, Aunt Carlotta is scarier.”

This made me laugh a little. Although we were not blood related, we shared the same aunt because she married into the De Luccis.

I checked the phone for any messages from Tony. Nothing.

“All right.” I got into the car.

Matteo made a production of revving the Jag and peeling away from the curb so abruptly that a vehicle honked at him.

Not that it fazed him. Guess he was a typical asshole with a small dick.

My cheeks burned. Why the hell was I thinking about his dick?

He was still an asshole.

As the voices of reason warred in my head, my peripheral vision caught him stealing glances at me.

“For the record, I admit to having a crush on Daniel, but it’s under control. I don’t fawn over him.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so.” I glared at him.

He cast me an amused glance. “Then why are you so defensive?”

“I’m not rising to that bait,” I said. “Now, what the hell is this all about?”

“I think we should date.”

I wasn't drinking anything, but I felt like liquid had sloshed down the wrong pipe given the chokehold around my throat. "What?"

He glanced at me again before returning his attention to traffic. "I think we should date. Fake dating of course. Just to light a fire under Daniel's ass—"

"I don't see why I need any—"

"He's not going to aggressively pursue you."

"Did it ever occur to you it's because he's more respectful and he doesn't drag women off and stuff them in his car?"

"If you say so."

"I'm not his type anyway. I've seen him with his women."

"A woman for fucking is not the same as a woman he'd consider as a future bride."

"Typical misogynist," I muttered. It was an odd time for me to notice how his long thick fingers skillfully maneuvered the steering wheel.

"If you don't know the difference between a misogynist and straight talker, then Luca's been feeding you bullshit," he said. "You think the leggy models Daniel dates are not just seeing his bank account? And have you seen him bring them to any business events?"

"There are women who see beyond his bank account."

"Exactly. Women like you," Matteo said. "Daniel knows this but he's not ready for a commitment."

"And you know him that well?"

"I'm sure I know him more than you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what you think I mean. Daniel likes to keep business and pleasure separate. Even separate from his family, which by extension, includes you."

"And you're aware of this separate side of him?"

“Yes, Sera.” He shot me a brief smile, and I caught a glimpse of why he was one of the most sought-after bachelors in Manhattan. Still, my tastes ran to less overbearing men. “I’m just explaining that he’s not an asshole to women. He’s very clear about the non-relationship because his focus is Wheeler Corp.”

I glanced out the window, already shaking my head. “Let’s just say this spurs Daniel to get jealous and make his move on me. What’s in it for you?”

“Daniel is fucking up a business deal because he’s spread too thin. He refuses to let me handle it. He needs to be distracted by something...worthwhile.”

“You mean me.”

“Who else?”

“Don’t you think he’ll become suspicious?”

“I know he will.” The corner of his mouth tipped up. “Besides...I heard a rumor that Luca is marrying you off to Conte’s nephew.”

I glanced at him sharply. “How did you—?”

“Daniel mentioned it—”

“And how did Daniel know and not indicate that he knew?”

Matteo chuckled in a way that made me want to beat him over his head of thick hair with my purse.

“Danny-boy may not be aggressive in his pursuit of his sister’s best friend, but it doesn’t mean he’s not that way in business.”

“How did he come upon this information?”

“Old man Conte might have mentioned it.” He made a turn onto the Brooklyn Bridge. “So is it true?”

Before I could answer him, I felt the phone in my purse vibrate. “Shit, I forgot to call Tony.”

Indeed it was my uncle's soldier asking where the hell I was.

I texted him back that I caught a ride. My phone immediately rang.

I had no choice but to answer it.

"Sera. What the fuck? Did you catch a cab?" Tony growled.

"No. Someone is driving me home."

"Who?"

"If you must know, it's Matteo De Lucci."

Profanity erupted over the line.

"So you see, I'm perfectly safe. It might be a good idea not to tell Luca though."

"I can't do that," he sputtered. "Your uncle will have my balls. De Lucci is taking you straight home, right?"

"Yes, he's really just being...nice."

"I don't trust him."

I side-eyed Matteo. His concentration was on the hectic bridge traffic, but his mouth was curved in amusement. Not that I wanted to cause conflict, but I was a big fan of cards on the table. "Tony says he doesn't trust you."

"Put him on speaker," Matteo said calmly.

"Fucker," was Tony's opening salvo. "Not a hair harmed on her."

"Look, Tony, I'm not the one in the mafia."

"Who says I am?"

I had to control a snort at Tony's aggrieved tone like he was accused of something so outrageous.

"It's just a friendly ride. And I'm sure you have a tracker on her phone. She wouldn't be with me if you picked her up on time, so stop deflecting. You're the one failing on the job. It's your fault. Own it."

There was silence over the line for a long time. “You bring her straight to Brooklyn.”

“That was the plan anyway.”

“Take me off speaker, Sera,” Tony said.

“I’m fine, Tony. Besides, he’s Carlotta’s nephew.”

“Yeah, but keep in mind that Carlotta’s no longer a Moretti. She’s one of them now. Rocco is waiting for you at home. Text him when you pull up and he’ll fetch you from the car. Do not let De Lucci into the house.”

“I won’t, but why?”

“You know better than askin’ questions.” Tony ended the call.

“Oh my God, they better not...” I seethed, but swallowed the sourness that coated my tongue. It was probably why Tony was late too. They were conducting business at the house. Luca knew what to expect if I caught them. I was born into the mafia. I wasn’t shielded from the family business like most women in that life were. I understood its ways. Found ways to live in it, but it didn’t mean I agreed with every single thing they did.

“Is everything all right?”

I was so deep in thought, I’d forgotten about Matteo. We were at another red light and his regard compelled me to look his way.

“Yes. Just...” I shrugged. “A minor irritation.”

“If it was minor, you wouldn’t have that look on your face.”

“Like what?”

“You were someplace else... I...” From his profile, I could tell he was frowning. “I don’t like being ignored.”

I snorted. “What? Your ego can’t handle it?”

“My ego is just fine. I was concerned for you.”

“Well, that’s a surprise.”

“Is everything okay at your house?”

“Yes.”

“Because I don’t want to leave you there if it isn’t.”

For a second, my heart rate skittered at such sweetness until another thought occurred to me. “Because you’re technically the last person to be seen with me.”

He sighed as he shifted gears. “I’m not sure dating you—even if it is fake—would be such a good idea. You’re so prickly.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or be offended. “Excuse me. You’re the one who manhandled me away from my friends. I don’t have to listen to what you have to say and I certainly didn’t get into this car to be insulted.”

His lips were twitching. I studied him more closely, discerning his features wasn’t easy in the compact interior of the sports car. But the light from New York night life confirmed that the pictures in the newspapers were an insult to this masculine perfection.

Straight roman nose. Deep-set eyes with impossibly long lashes that rivaled my own. A mouth that was not thin, not thick but just right. The De Luccis were known for their perfectly chiseled jaw.

“Like what you see?” Matteo said cockily with an even cockier smile that would qualify as a smirk.

“You’re not my type.”

He burst out laughing. “And what’s your type, little girl?”

“Is that in reference to my height, because you’re not much older than me...I think.”

“I’m twenty-seven.”

“I’m twenty-six, but I guess you already know that. And I’m not really tiny.” I was five-two.

He shot me a quick glance, then checked his side mirror to make a lane change, but not before I saw a flash of teeth.

“What? I’m not. I’m five-five. That’s average height for a woman.”

The Jag finally turned on a side road that had less traffic and Matteo awarded me a longer look, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes. When he returned his attention to the road ahead, he said, “My sister is taller than you and she keeps insisting she’s five-four, so five-five is pushing it. And just saying, I like small packages, so I’m in no way criticizing you.”

“Yes, you shouldn’t really since you need a favor from me.”

“I think we’d be doing each other a favor.”

“It seems you need me more.”

Matteo didn’t respond for a while. It did not surprise me he knew exactly where to drive the Jaguar. Still, I wasn’t letting it pass. “It’s creepy that you know where I live. Courtesy would be to ask me.”

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I’m just not a fan of wasting time.”

“Geez, I wonder what your girlfriends say to that.” Heat rushed up my face. “Don’t answer that. It’s just that, you’re so infuriating.”

“Now is that any attitude to take toward your future boyfriend?”

The sports car was crawling too slowly for my comfort. Normally, I was used to sparring with arrogant men who bulldozed me into making decisions. I certainly had a lot of practice with the men in my family, but I wasn’t prepared for Matteo De Lucci and it was a challenge not to remain off-kilter. “I haven’t agreed to anything.”

“What’s there to think about? It’s a win-win for you.”

The arrogance. “For one thing, you’re making me sound pathetic. If I have a crush on Daniel, I’m not about to get underhanded to gain his attention.”

“You don’t need me to flatter you, Sera.” He tapped the steering wheel. “You’re a regular in the Chicago society pages. You know what you’re worth. What I’m suggesting isn’t being underhanded, it’s a ploy as old as time.”

“What, making a man jealous?” I scoffed.

“Men are competitive. Daniel *is* competitive. He can go about the pursuit of his business because he can keep tabs on you.”

Keep me on the backburner while he went about sleeping with supermodels. How flattering. It pissed me off. I wasn’t a virgin he needed to keep pure while he sowed his oats. Although my uncle’s reputation about scaring off my admirers might have something to do with it.

“As Ivy’s friend.”

“You got it.” Matteo hitched his shoulders. “He just needs a...nudge.”

“I’ve had boyfriends before and Daniel didn’t seem concerned.”

He didn’t respond immediately, considering my words. “Maybe he didn’t see them as worthy competition.”

I had to laugh. “Are you paying yourself a compliment?”

“Are you saying any of your boyfriends measure up to me?”

The ego, but I was surprisingly not irritated about it, just immensely amused. Matteo De Lucci was an entertaining man. I might not suffer his company after all. Still, I couldn’t be impulsive about this because it challenged my envisioned future.

I must consider the repercussions and risks to family allegiances. A spark of rebellion and a future with Daniel escaped in a breath of hope.

Mrs. Daniel Wu.

A tiny smile formed on my lips.

“I can’t interpret that smile on your face,” Matteo said in the same beat as, “This is you.”

Rocco got up from the stone steps that led into the brownstone. He wasn’t a big man, but he had arms like tree trunks.

“Your bodyguard, I presume?” the man who just offered to fake-date me asked.

“Yes.”

“So, do we have an agreement?”

I didn’t answer him until the Jaguar pulled up right in front of the house. “No.”

I exited the vehicle, heard Matteo curse, which was followed by his door opening and closing.

“Sera,” he called.

I glanced over my shoulder. “If you want a date from me, Mr. De Lucci, that would take more than a car ride. Do better next time.” I shot him a derisive smile. “I’m not easy.”

CHAPTER

Three

SERA

The phone calls started the second after I freshened up and got ready for bed. Two missed calls and six messages from Ivy. One missed call from Luca, including two messages.

Hmm, whose call to return first?

A knock rapped on my door.

“Sera.” It was Tony. He probably had just arrived. As I suspected, boxes of contraband were in the kitchen. Russian caviar as well as top-shelf whisky.

Opening the door a crack, I asked, “What?”

He shoved a phone between the opening. “Luca wants to speak to you.”

“I’ll call him...” He was already shaking his head. My bodyguards made such an interesting duo because in contrast to Rocco’s stocky build, Tony was tall and lean. When they weren’t babysitting me, they were collectors for the outfit. Tony was the talker while Rocco was the muscle.

“Fine.” I snagged the phone from him and shut the door. “Hi, Luca.”

“Hi? Hi? That’s all you have to say after pulling a stunt like this?”

“What stunt? I got into a car with a guest. He’s Carlotta’s nephew. I was hardly in danger.”

Carlotta was married to Matteo's uncle. It was such a small world, my mind did a jig to *really* make sure I wasn't blood related to Matteo, otherwise his suggestion to fake date was vomit-inducing.

My nonno, Emilio Moretti, had three wives. He was called the black widower because he outlived the first two. From his first marriage, he had three children. My father, Emilio Jr., was the eldest son. Carlotta was the middle child, and Ange was the youngest. Nonno's second wife bore him three sons. Luca was the youngest of that brood. The two older ones denounced our crime family, dropped the Moretti last name, and moved back to Italy. I hardly remembered them. When Nonno married his third wife and had another daughter, that was when the problems started with Carlotta. My aunt simply didn't get along with a stepmother who was younger than her.

After my father Emilio Jr. got killed, Ange was expected to be the next boss. But Nonno held on to that position until his deathbed two years ago when he named Luca as his successor. Many were surprised because he was the youngest son. Not me though. I understood why Nonno picked Luca. He was a visionary unlike Ange who remained rooted in the old ways of organized crime. I was also biased because he was my favorite uncle.

Most of the time.

"If you were here right now..." Luca growled.

"What? You'd send me to the convent? You and Nonno have been threatening me with it since I was sixteen." I grabbed my other phone and shot a quick text to Ivy to tell her I was fine. She might very well be pestering Daniel to check on me. I'd be mortified if her brother showed up in Brooklyn.

This was a strange night.

Propositioned by a De Lucci.

"Now is not the time for that smart mouth. What did De Lucci want?"

"He offered me a ride home. Why are you up in arms about this? You've done business with the man."

“You’re a double major business and economics degree. Master’s from Stanford. Magna cum laude. You want to act like an airhead, don’t do it around me.”

“Ouch. It’s not an act. It’s nothing. Maybe he’s interested. I don’t know.”

Silence.

Then I rewound the conversation we had in front of the brownstone.

“Okay, he asked me out.”

“Finally, she admits it.”

“Then you know I didn’t say yes.”

“But why is he interested?”

“You know, just because you find me annoying doesn’t mean that other men won’t find me attractive.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You don’t need me to pander to your ego. The Chicago society pages do enough of that.”

What the hell? Had he and Matteo compared notes?

My frequent appearance in the society pages had nothing to do with me having unusual beauty, a sparkling personality, or a giant trust fund. It had everything to do with the family’s publicity machine to build me up as a lucrative commodity to be used in an alliance through marriage. It could be political, but I was looking more like a mafia bride. The underworld had its own politics anyway.

“As if you had nothing to do with it. You write the checks to pay the family’s PR.”

“I take their advice on how to position family interests. And I’m told you are a Moretti jewel, a rare rose.”

More like a rose among the thorns.

“At least you didn’t call me a mafia princess.”

Luca chuckled. “The press likes to romanticize it. I’m merely pandering to what they want.”

My uncle was a grandstander sometimes. “I think you’re fattening me up for the kill.”

“Santino Conte is a good match.”

“He’s the highest earner of the Galluzo mafia. Most of his money is from drugs and there’s also a rumor he’s involved in human trafficking. I’ve made my position clear on this.”

“The Galluzo is planning to diversify into more legitimate business. Real estate around the olive oil industry. You will be an asset to him.”

“Dear uncle, why don’t you put yourself on the chopping block? The Galluzo has their own prized princess. And she’s not even in Italy but in NYU.”

“I don’t have time to play Romeo. She’s bookish and a romantic at heart. She’d be miserable married to me.”

I wasn’t surprised Luca had considered marriage and investigated the possibility of a Conte bride for himself. The family consigliere had suggested it would cement his position as head of the family.

“And we’re not talking about me. Don’t change the subject.”

“Where the hell was Santino at the Wheeler-Conte partnership gala if he was interested in this marriage?”

“He has other responsibilities.”

“To the Galluzo.”

“This conversation is going nowhere,” he said. “I’ve had my say. Know your duties to the family. I can’t stop you from seeing De Lucci from here, but I’m not going to make it easy for him to ruin my plans either.”

“This is my life we’re talking about,” I shouted into the phone. My outburst surprised me. The word “duty” said in Luca’s unequivocal tone triggered a resentment that was unfamiliar. Earlier this evening I was resigned to a possible arranged marriage. Was it because Matteo planted a future with Daniel in my head?

“You’re getting emotional. Sleep on it and you’ll see I’m right.”

The phone went dead.

I stared at it a second longer before I marched over to the door and yanked it open. Tony was leaning against the wall opposite my door.

I handed him the phone. “Snitch.”

“My job,” he returned without remorse.

“I didn’t get a chance to tell him, but he owes me tax for that crap you guys have in the kitchen and I want it in my account by tomorrow morning.”

I slammed the door in his face.



Matteo

“One more rep, champ.”

Sweat beaded my forehead before I grunted a final push, heaving the bar up to the rack where it landed with a clang.

“Three-fifty.” Nico smirked at me. “Not bad.”

I ab-crunched on the weight bench to a sitting position, accepting the towel from my brother’s hand before grabbing the water bottle at my feet to quench my thirst.

“Not bad?” I growled. “Is there a reason you want to maim me before I meet Sera for breakfast?”

Nico dropped his ass on the opposite bench, taking a draw from his water bottle.

I wouldn’t be lifting weights regularly if my brother didn’t drag me out of bed every morning. He liked the gym in my building. And although I’d given him a permanent pass, he still insisted we lift together. Nico had been a scrawny teenager before he turned seventeen and began to bulk up.

That time it was me who dragged him into the gym because I had to remain fit as the quarterback on the football team.

After consuming the contents of his water bottle, he tilted it in my direction. “Does she know you’re meeting her for breakfast?”

“No.” The anticipation of seeing her outrage tipped my mouth at its corners. I didn’t know why I wanted to piss her off except it was incredibly fun to do so. “Dan told me they were meeting her for breakfast.”

“They meaning Ivy?”

I frowned at the inane question. “Of course. Who else? He wouldn’t see Sera by himself. His sudden interest would be suspicious.”

Nico rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Yeah. But what if Dan is just deflecting and he’s really interested in Sera?”

I considered that possibility. It was Daniel’s idea for me to fake-date Sera. He was convinced she had a crush on him. I would hazard to conclude he cared enough about her and he didn’t want her marrying the likes of Santino Conte. Maybe he was too chickenshit to jeopardize his deal with Gustavo by going after Sera, so he was siccing me on her to interfere with Chicago’s plans to marry her off while he took his own sweet time to pursue her with marriage in mind. “I haven’t seen him look at Sera that way.”

“He’s a wily businessman,” Nico said. “And he’s not bad at poker himself, though he couldn’t get any bluff past me.” My brother was a card shark and he had quite a reputation that he’d been banned in some games. “How far are you going to take it?”

I stood and walked toward the locker rooms. Nico followed and caught up with me.

How far? Maybe a kiss.

I earned a fucking kiss at least to agree to this shit although it would help our endgame. Not that it would be a hardship. Sera was sexy as fuck. It shouldn’t be a chore to kiss her. I might even enjoy it just to piss her off.

“How far?” Nico asked, pulling me back before I entered the locker room where other people might hear our conversation.

I grinned. “Are you asking if I’m going to fuck her?”

Nico narrowed his eyes. “Obviously, I wasn’t asking if you were going to kiss her hand.”

“Anything to make it convincing to the paparazzi so the news will get back to Gustavo and push our advantage.”

“You think he doesn’t already know?”

I shrugged. I didn’t bother responding to my messages this morning. One from Mom. One from Dad. Two from Aunt Carlotta, and lastly, one from Luca Moretti telling me to stay the fuck away from his niece if I was attached to my balls.

I had an email from Gustavo’s admin. She sent it at four thirty this morning.

I was suddenly looking forward to pissing everyone off. Because I was that De Lucci. Maybe I was a vindictive son of a bitch. I started learning the ropes of De Lucci Transnational when I was eighteen and became more involved when I turned twenty-three. I was cocky as shit until reality punched me in the face. CEOs refused to talk to me. It wasn’t about my age either. The problem mostly came from full-blooded Italians like Gustavo. It didn’t take me long to realize that they had issues with me being half Irish. And as an added blow to my ego, my father frequently intervened, but I’d learned to weather it. Every deal was a balance sheet, but like an elephant, I had a long memory. Money wasn’t any use without power, and I made sure the De Luccis had plenty of it and I wasn’t squeamish about wielding it.

Nico’s chest shook with a silent laugh. “I see that devil of a smile on your face.”

Yes, the devil was in the house.

CHAPTER

Four

SERA

I met Ivy at our favorite coffee shop in Greenwich Village. Rocco and Tony were loitering around somewhere. I couldn't see them but I knew they were there.

The summer humidity that blanketed the city had lifted, leaving the exhaust from the subway to dissipate into cool crisp air, a perfect morning to sit at the outdoor patio and enjoy urban living.

"I can't believe it was in the fifties this morning," I told Ivy, admiring the latte art on my cappuccino before taking a sip.

"And I can't believe we're talking about the weather," my friend said without looking up at me, balancing her phone in one hand while arranging her coffee mug for the best angle with the other. "Now, quiet. I'm showing my followers that I'm still on keto coffee."

"That's an abomination," I groaned as I watched her dump a teaspoon of coconut oil into her brew. It didn't taste bad. Still, Italians were picky about their java and my purist heart couldn't help cringing.

Ivy flipped the camera at me who she named as her secondary character before switching the lens back to her. "Day forty-five on keto coffee. Has anyone tried this yet? I feel lighter and less bloated."

I withheld a snort of derision. She was complaining about the hangover from hell this morning. Trying to hide my amusement, I picked up my giant croissant and was about to take a bite when two figures caught my attention.

I blinked.

Matteo and Nico De Lucci.

After Matteo crashed the gala last night, Ivy had given me the latest deets on them. With the Wheeler publicity machine at her disposal, my friend was up to date with the movers and shakers of Wall Street. The tabloids called them The Broody Brothers because of those piercing stares that made half the women in Manhattan drop their panties for. Not to mention the way these brothers prowled the boardroom while poured into exquisitely tailored suits had frequently set hearts atwitter in the world of high finance. Also, according to Ivy, Matteo's girlfriends never lasted three months while Nico preferred older women.

This morning Nico was in gray sweatpants and a loose white tee. Matteo was in dark jeans and a dark T-shirt emblazoned with faded gold and red print. Their thick hair was combed back, but I couldn't help noticing how locks fell over Matteo's forehead. He raked it back with his fingers but the wayward curl wouldn't cooperate. Casual outfits failed to subdue their imposing presence judging by how pedestrians turned their heads and lowered their shades to gawk as though Greek gods had descended from Mt. Olympus.

"How did they know we were here?" I asked.

Ivy finished her video, then squinted at the rapidly approaching pair. "My brother." She typed into her phone.

"Is your brother trying to set me up?"

"Asking him."

My heart sank. If Daniel liked me, would he give up my location to the De Luccis so willingly?

My friend made an annoyed sound and swiped a number. I heard Daniel come on the line. "Well, why did you?"

Whatever her brother was saying invited displeasure on my friend's face. "You were christened the Tiger of Hong Kong real estate. You're giving yourself a bad reputation if you caved to the De Luccis."

I could hear laughter over the phone. Ivy snapped, "I don't care if raptors trump tigers, you shouldn't have given us up to these De Luccis."

She timed that statement just as the guys reached our table.

While Ivy arched one of her brows to the highest I'd ever seen it reach, I hid my annoyance behind my coffee cup.

The guys didn't even ask if they could join us. They simply took the seats in front of us.

"What's good here?" Matteo eyed the croissant in my hand.

"Not my croissant," I retorted, holding it away from him.

"Now, is that the way to talk to your future boyfriend?"

"You're delusional."

"What?" Ivy gasped, her accusation directed at me. "What happened last night?"

Our server saved me from answering when she waltzed to our table. She might have batted her eyelashes at the De Lucci boys, I wouldn't know, but by the way she cocked her hip against our table, she had the whole flirty pose down.

"Welcome to Spiked," she chirped and handed them menus. "Coffee?"

"Ladies?" Matteo asked, but he was looking at me. "Want anything else? A refill?"

"I'm good," I said before taking a bite of my croissant. When I lowered it, I moved my plate away from the maddening man.

My face was reflected on his sunglasses and I was irritated I couldn't see the expression in his eyes.

Rude.

“Two shots of espresso,” Nico said, removing his wayfarers and setting them carefully on the table.

“Same,” Matteo said, and as if sensing his shades were the reason for my less than friendly reception, he took them off and the intensity of his brilliant blue eyes stole my words. I thought they were inky last night, but this morning, wow.

His brother scanned the menu, but took a peek between Ivy and me. “What’s good here besides not-your-croissant?”

“What happened last night?” Ivy repeated. She was glaring at Nico.

He shrugged. “I’m just here to eat breakfast, Poison Ivy.”

Oooh, I could feel my friend’s hackles rise, but I trusted Ivy to hold her own. She leaned in and purred, “As much as I love her character, I don’t know you enough to appreciate that nickname.” With that retort, she turned to me and dismissed Nico. “Is there something I should know?”

Matteo quirked a brow, challenging me to answer, so I said, “Apparently, he’s been harboring a secret crush on me.”

I dared him to deny it. Nico started chuckling, apparently amused by my answer while his brother sat silent.

“Really?” Ivy leaned back and split a glance between them. “And this has nothing to do with the deal you and Daniel are fighting for control over?”

“How unromantic,” Nico scoffed. “You’re saying your friend is not beautiful enough to catch my brother’s attention?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Ivy retorted.

Finally, Matteo reacted, frowning at his brother. “Bro, you’re ruining my chances. Shut up.”

“Don’t worry.” I tore another piece of the pastry and stuffed it in my mouth. “I do not aspire to become desirable to a De Lucci.”

Matteo’s gaze whipped back in my direction. “Sounds like a challenge.”

“Are you guys ready to order?” The waitress came back and the scowl on Matteo’s face made the woman falter...“Or not.”

“He is.” I grabbed the menu out of his hands. “He’ll have the eggs Benedict with bacon and a side of pancakes.”

The scowl disappeared, smoothed away by surprised mirth judging by the twitching corners of his mouth. “I will?”

“Yes.” I hoped he liked eggs.

Our server glanced at me as though unsure.

“Whatever the girlfriend says,” he said.

Damn. Did I just consign myself to be his girlfriend?

Nico put in his order of a dozen egg whites and pancakes.

I thought my bossiness in ordering for him would bring him down a notch or two as well as let him know I wasn’t a pushover who he could steamroll into doing anything he wanted. I equated these De Luccis to my uncle. Arrogant and wanting to be at the top of the food chain. The apex, the alphas. They identified weaknesses and moved in for the kill.

Fortunately for me, Luca didn’t want me to show weakness. I guessed because I represented the family, so he conditioned me not to be meek at all. I was in high school when I experienced my first broken heart, courtesy of a popular boy in school. Luca shamed me for my tears and I was mad at him for a while. Maybe that toughened me up, taught me how to hide my feelings, fake it until I make it. If that was what saved me from throwing myself at Daniel, then I should be thankful.

“I was saving our server from you,” I told him. “You had a scary scowl on your face.”

His brows drew together.

“See?” My lips twitched.

Ivy whispered conspiratorially but loud enough for them to hear. “Broody Brothers.”

I laughed, but caught myself when Matteo had this strange look on his face.

“Are we letting them make fun of us?” Nico demanded in a voice where I didn’t know whether he was offended or not.

“What are they doing here?” Tony and Rocco showed up at our table. I forgot they were around.

“Some bodyguards you have,” Matteo muttered. He addressed my uncle’s soldiers. “We’ve been here for a while. Luca should fire you.”

“He can’t fire us because we’re—” Tony broke off. He was about to say *made* which meant he was an initiated member of the mafia, and it was frowned upon to admit outside the *family* and in public.

Matteo grinned and stared at his empty espresso cup. He’d made his point. The asshole.

“Luca said to keep him away from you,” Rocco said.

“You want to start a brawl right here?” Nico challenged, unperturbed.

“Please don’t,” I told Matteo’s brother.

I pointed my chin at Tony and Rocco. “I’m fine. Besides, Ivy knows kung fu if these two misbehave.”

“But, Sera—” Tony started.

Matteo was about to say something, but I kicked him under the table. “My family, my problem.”

I stood from the table and walked around Matteo to get to Tony and Rocco, herding them out of earshot. “I can handle him.”

“The boss is not going to like this,” Tony said.

“You’re not going to tell Luca.”

“No can do—”

“You know what’s going to happen. Luca’s going to ask where you guys were, and then what are you going to say?”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “We were doing as you asked. Giving you privacy with Miss Wu. So you can have a piece of normalcy before—”

“Before what? Uncle dearest marries me off?”

“He’s not going to force you. Luca is not that old-fashioned.”

“Good, but it doesn’t change the fact that the De Lucci brothers managed to slip past you.”

“You’re using your request against us?”

“Why not? You snitched on me.”

Both men glanced at each other.

“She’s getting too manipulative,” Rocco said.

“She’s always been that way,” Tony replied. “I pity her future husband.”

“Come on, you two, don’t tell Luca. I’ll get rid of Matteo.”

Tony glanced past me to look at the De Luccis. “All right, but we’ll be close by.”

“Fine.” I might have heard them mutter that I was a pain in the ass.

I was fond of my minders, but sometimes they were a pain in my butt too. Though I was used to it, I wished Luca would be done with whatever bullshit business he had that necessitated the extra guards. When I was in college, every once in a while, a couple of soldiers would appear and guard me for a couple of weeks depending on the war Chicago had with other players in the underworld.

“They’re not very good bodyguards,” Matteo commented when I returned to my seat.

“Not that it’s any of your business but it’s upon my request that they give me space.”

“Things are hot in Chicago right now?” he asked.

I ignored him and tore another piece from my croissant which seemed to be less than when I’d left it. I refused to

acknowledge he stole a bite. Nico and Ivy were embroiled in their own discussion about martial arts. It seemed he didn't believe Ivy really knew kung fu and was making smart-ass commentary questioning her skill. I let my friend handle him. Ivy really knew how to spar. Wing Chun something. Besides, I needed my wits about me with his brother.

When I didn't answer, Matteo tipped his chin to the croissant. "It's airy with good layers."

"Airy?" I expected him to say something asinine like it was buttery and immediately felt guilty about forming prejudices about him.

He shrugged as if the word wasn't weird coming out of his mouth. "My brother Lorenzo owns a café-bakery. He made sure he educated us on that shit."

What didn't they own?

"Fair enough."

"You should come by."

"Thanks for the invite, but I'll be heading back to Chicago." In reality, I was planning to stay in New York for a few weeks, but he didn't need to know that.

"Well, that's a bummer." Matteo leaned back in his seat.

"What?" I eyed him innocently. "Did I ruin your plans for making me your girlfriend?"

Ivy snapped out of her conversation with Nico. "Again, what's that all about?"

"It takes more than distance to discourage me." His eyes gleamed.

Fine. I hadn't run out of strategies yet to turn him off. I winked at Ivy. "De Lucci thinks he's going to woo me."

The server brought out their food. Behind her, one of the managers and another waitstaff brought out boxes of deli sandwiches and chips.

"Miss Moretti." The manager came forward with a smile. "Thank you for partnering with us for your event."

“Of course.” With what I was about to do, I bit my lower lip to keep from laughing. When the manager handed me the bill for a hundred sandwiches and chips, I put it in front of Matteo.

Ivy burst out laughing. Even Nico couldn't hide his grin.

Matteo's brows shot to his hairline before he caught my eyes with an amused, if not admiring gaze. “Well played, Sera Moretti.”

“That's peanuts to you.” I stood. Tony and Rocco were already picking up the boxes and couldn't hide their own smirks.

“Enjoy your breakfast.”



The Morettis supported different charities. The Merciful Sisters of St. Rita was one of them. They had many chapters scattered around the world, and in the U.S. they were in major cities from L.A. to New York. They ran the soup kitchens for the homeless, giving precedence to women who had children. As a child, I'd always been fascinated with the life of St. Rita, which was why it was the first charity I picked to use the “tax” I collected from the family's cost of doing business.

It was my condition the first time Luca knowingly involved me in mob business. I taxed luxury goods at five percent because who else bought expensive alcohol and caviar anyway but rich people? Firearms and stolen vehicles were taxed higher which was why they took great pains to hide them from me. A one percent tax was already built into the online gambling and real estate business and it was usually distributed to different charities at Christmas and Easter. My uncle was extremely pious, yet he was a trigger-happy hothead who shot people when they irritated him. Someone needed to save him from hell. I did the same for Nonno, and bless his soul, I hoped I'd been in time to reform him. It would make me extremely sad if he was burning in hell right now.

As for my own conscience, I didn't have one as long as a starving family got to eat and I did my part to redeem Luca for every sin he'd committed. He said his confessions to the *padre* were enough, but personally I think the priest was a hypocrite and he should try to guide Luca to better choices. In my opinion, he was afraid to say something to my uncle that would make him pull the big check he gave the parish.

Currently, I was behind a row of collapsible tables serving the homeless of New York City. It wasn't unheard of that the mafia contributed to this form of charity. The soup kitchen could trace its beginnings to Al Capone who started them during the Great Depression.

"So does that mean I keep my cut?" Tony motioned for the next person to move forward. Or persons. A mother and a child. They slid their trays forward and I put the sandwich and the chips on them.

"No, it will be adjusted accordingly," I said.

Tony scowled. He had a scary scowl and luckily the woman and the kid weren't looking at him. Tony and Rocco acted belligerent all the time, but I knew they were good people when it came to these types of activities. Maybe they considered it penance for their life of crime too.

"What do you say to the nice lady?" the mother asked her daughter.

"Thank you." The child couldn't be more than six years old.

The mother faced me and that was when I saw the bruise on her cheek. I hated this part of volunteer work because I had witnessed many victims of domestic violence and there was only so much I could do. Sometimes I wanted to say something, be encouraging and tell them they did the right thing by leaving the situation. But it was not my place, I didn't have the training, so rather than sound condescending, I said nothing. There were counselors for that. Instead, I said, "There are Styrofoam containers with complete meals up ahead." I smiled and hoped it conveyed the sentiment I wanted to impart.

The mother and daughter smiled back and proceeded to where a nun was supervising the distribution of their regular balanced meal. My sandwiches and chips were a bonus to what the soup kitchen prepared every Friday.

“You can’t help all of them,” Tony commented. The first wave of people had come through. It was less than what was expected.

There were a few sandwiches left in my box of fifty. “Let’s consolidate before the next wave. I have a feeling when word of mouth spreads that there are gourmet sandwiches too, we’ll be slammed.”

“You could have just cut them a bigger check so they could roll it into the meals for the next few weeks.”

“I know.” I thought about this often. “But sometimes, it’s just seeing how their faces light up when they see something special to look forward to, you know? The hope that they deserve better things.”

“Sera,” Tony said gently. “In the end, they gotta help themselves.”

“Go get the box,” I retorted. He could be right, but it didn’t mean I had to listen to him.

My eyes wandered around the church’s rec center. Kids were bouncing basketballs in the corner, faces glowing with the joy of a full stomach and knowing they had another meal that night.

I squared my shoulders. I stood by what I was doing. Even when the money donated to charity came from illegal business, the end justified the means. That was what Nonno said, that was what Luca always said. Not what the *padre* preached, but again, that priest was the hypocrite.

My eyes widened when a familiar figure crossed the double doors of the gymnasium. He was chatting with Sister Agnes, the head of the Merciful Sisters in New York.

What the hell? Matteo followed me here?

He had changed from his sporty outfit and was wearing a dignified suit.

How did he find me? Daniel again?

Ivy and I split ways after breakfast because their store in the Meatpacking District had problems, and being that it was Friday, it was going to be busy. That was two hours ago.

“That motherfucker is persistent.” Tony dropped the box of sandwiches on the table. “How did he get past Rocco?”

Good question.

I put my hand on his arm before he confronted Matteo. This was the last place I wanted them to have a fight.

When the nun and Matteo reached our table, Tony’s scowl made Sister Agnes hesitate, but I smiled to reassure her even when keeping it natural was difficult.

Matteo, for his part, had a neutral face, but his eyes were laughing.

Asshole.

He was daring me to berate him in front of the nun.

“Mr. De Lucci,” I said sweetly. “This is a pleasant surprise.” Shit. What if he mentioned to the sister that he was the one who paid for all the sandwiches?

“You mentioned this charity last night,” Matteo said. “You said I can help out.”

“Mr. De Lucci gave us a big donation.” Sister Agnes clasped her hands together. Hmm, I wonder how big was big. Obviously, the nun was keeping the amount confidential, but it was bugging the heck out of me. Why the hell was I so competitive?

Because this is my charity, my unreasonable self argued.

I realized they were waiting for me to say something. I forced a wider smile and clasped my hands as well. “That’s amazing.” I turned to Tony because I had the oddest desire to wipe that triumphant look from Matteo’s face. “Isn’t it

amazing?” I pursed my lips and glared at my uncle’s soldier to clear the displeasure from his expression.

“Yeah,” Tony mumbled.

“And I’m sorry again for being so last minute about this,” I told the nun. “I just didn’t want to bother you last night when I told Mr. De Lucci here what I was going to do.”

Matteo caught on and he had the grace to look apologetic.

Yes, asshole, check with me first before you lie.

“Well, since you’re here,” I added. “How about you help me? Tony, take a break with Rocco. I’m sure Mr. De Lucci and I can manage the next wave.”

“Oh.” The nun looked at Matteo’s starchy appearance.

“No worries,” my interloper said, peeling off his suit jacket and then loosening his tie. For the first time since he crashed into my life, I found the movement sexy.

“I’m not sure I want to,” Tony started.

“Go,” I said firmly.

Tony glowered at Matteo. “Just so you know, she’s bossy.”

Matteo chuckled. “I’m aware.”

Tony would have threatened him more if the nun wasn’t there, but he gave a curt nod to Sister Agnes and stalked off.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to manage.” The nun split her gaze between us. “You look so good together.”

God no.

Even without glancing at Matteo, I could feel his amusement. I turned to him to give him a cutting stare, but he managed to distract me by rolling up his sleeves, this time, exposing his tanned forearms that were dusted with a mat of hair. And I was one of those women who salivated over hairy forearms.

Daniel had decent hair on his, but Matteo De Lucci, damn...he had indecently sexy forearms.

He raised a brow.

And damn him, he knew where my mind went. This was a man who knew he was attractive and used it to his advantage. Well, I wasn't easy game and I'd show him.

I flashed him a smile before returning a more genuine one to the nun, who asked, "Is there anything else you need from me?"

"No. We're good."

"I'll leave you two, then."

I turned to face Matteo. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to figure out what makes you tick." He nodded to the first few patrons coming through the door. "We'll talk later. Let's get set up. I can hand these out. Why don't you manage the line?"

CHAPTER

Five

MATTEO

“Thank you,” the father of three boys told us before ushering his kids past our table. Sera reminded them of more take-home food at the end of the line.

When she left me holding a three-thousand dollar bill, I was caught off guard. I wasn’t sure what the food was for, and it wouldn’t go down well if it was for a mobster’s luncheon.

How could this tiny slip of a woman annoy me as well as impress me? I couldn’t think of the last time anyone managed that feat.

I abandoned my breakfast after signing the bill and left Nico at the restaurant. Luckily, I used my motorcycle this morning and that made following Sera and her bodyguards easier.

Either I was too good at tailing, or they sucked at their jobs because they never *made* me. That shit bothered me and I had no idea why. From my conversations with Daniel, Sera rarely needed bodyguards, only when her uncle was making a play.

But apparently, Sera Moretti wasn’t done surprising me. When I realized where she was going, awed admiration replaced any lingering traces of annoyance.

I straddled my bike in front of St. Catherine’s church, a line waited to get in. A sign indicating the soup-kitchen

schedule for the day was in clear view from where I was observing.

The only Moretti I kept tabs on was Luca and whoever was in his inner circle. I wished I had paid attention when Aunt Carlotta mentioned Sera and her accomplishments. I thought Daniel was out of his mind when he suggested I fake-date her to light a fire under Gustavo's ass. Taking her home yesterday, I realized I hadn't enjoyed a conversation with a woman in a long time. Beautiful women were everywhere in New York, and Sera Moretti's external attributes weren't enough to lure me to pursue her exclusively. I'd cop to staring a bit too long into her eyes or at her full mouth. But this...there were layers underneath her physical perfection.

Her personality? I was digging it.

Our verbal sparring? I didn't want it to end.

Every second I spent in her presence made her eyes more mesmerizing. Every word that passed her lips made me wonder how they might taste against my own. A smile curved my mouth. We hadn't exchanged many words during the current shift, but that didn't mean I wasn't studying her. Sometimes, I'd catch her sneaking glances at me too. She was aware of me. In what aspect I wasn't sure, but if her way of thinking was the same as mine, it was to decide whether we were enemies or allies.

Because if Conte wouldn't sell the controlling shares to the De Luccis, marriage between Sera Moretti and Conte's nephew would make the Galluzo mafia too powerful. *We* couldn't allow that to happen.

While Sera greeted the next family who approached our table, a strange feeling rattled in my chest. A feeling that I didn't want us to be adversaries.

I wanted Sera Moretti on my side. I'd done my research on Santino Conte and he was an arrogant, reckless, and immoral son of a bitch and a womanizer. He was totally wrong for Sera. Daniel was a better option, but somehow my mind rebelled against that idea too.

“Stop staring at me.” Sera scowled in my direction when an adolescent girl and a young boy arrived at our table.

“I find your face fascinating.” I put the sandwiches on the trays in front of me.

“She looks like an angel,” the child agreed even as his eyes ate up the sub in front of him.

“And she’s our guardian angel,” the teenage girl said.

“How old are you?” Sera asked the boy.

“Eight,” he said proudly. “It was my birthday last week.”

“You’re tall for eight,” Sera replied.

“That’s because you’re tiny,” the boy said.

I swallowed a huff of laughter because the boy’s teenage companion looked mortified. “I’m sorry. He doesn’t watch his words sometimes. Come on, Johnny, there’s a line behind us.”

Sera didn’t seem offended because she was laughing as well. Damn, she did look like an angel worthy of the name Seraphina. “You were definitely lying about your height yesterday. Even the boy was honest.”

“Shut up,” Sera said under her breath as our next patrons stepped up. Amusement curved her lips, so I know my teasing fell on the right side of her mood.

An hour later, we packed up. When Rocco and Tony returned, Sera instructed them to help the nuns clean up. She grabbed my arm and dragged me to a corner.

From her body language I had an idea what she was going to say, but it still didn’t lessen my anticipation of hearing it. I must be a masochist for this woman’s rejection.

She let go of my arm and her hands flew to her hips. “Whatever you’re doing, stop.”

“Why?”

“Why? What is wrong with you?”

“I’m trying to save you from making a mistake.”

“And making a bigger, crazier one by agreeing to your plan? I don’t need Luca breathing down my neck.”

My jaw clenched. “Is he forcing you to marry Santino Conte?”

She looked away. “No one is forcing me to do anything.”

“Look me in the eye and say that again.”

She made an exaggerated huff and glared at me. “No one is forcing me.”

“You really want to marry that egotistical ass?”

“I suggest holding a mirror to yourself.”

I glanced around. More than a few interested eyes turned our way, and I could probably spend an hour or two making my case and talk about this round and round and not get tired of every excuse she came up with, but this was not the place.

I stared at her. “Have dinner with me.”

“What? You want to have dinner with me after I just insulted you?”

“You think I’m an egotistical ass, I want to prove you wrong.”

“A man of action?” This time her brow arched.

“You can say that.”

I witnessed the few seconds she considered it, but a determined set to her jaw told me I hadn’t cracked Sera Moretti’s resolve to resist me yet.

“This isn’t going anywhere. Don’t waste your time or mine.”

She started to walk away, but I caught her elbow and played my final card. She glared at me and was about to cut me off, but I beat her to it. “Dan isn’t worth it?”

Her head dropped, averting her gaze but not the sadness of her expression.

“Daniel was never an endgame,” she whispered before lifting her eyes and I flinched at the raw pain reflected there.

The longing in them constricted my chest. “I have a duty to the family. Please don’t make me yearn for something that will never happen.”

She gently pried my fingers away. “Do not contact me again.”



“Mrs. Mancini is here to see you,” Jonas, my admin, informed Nico and me when we exited the boardroom. De Lucci Transnational was a privately owned company. We had investors, but we did not answer to stockholders. We had absolute control. That control enabled the company to survive the real estate collapse over a decade ago. Dad and Uncle Paulie were smart enough not to buy into the bubble and rescued several companies afterward. More than a few, we had to dismantle and convert their assets to a more profitable investment. We’d been accused of corporate raiding and mobbing up businesses but they could never find proof, so it remained a rumor.

Mrs. Mancini was a longtime friend of Dad. Her winery in the Hudson Valley was bleeding money and was the red ink on our balance sheets. She also thought we existed to bankroll her questionable business practices and didn’t see the need to make an appointment, thinking we worked on her time.

Jonas had turned her away the past few times, but apparently it hadn’t sunk in.

I was sick of it. Dad’s friend or not, we were running a corporation, and I was in charge now.

Nico looked at me with a pained expression.

“Need me with you?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Keep your meeting with Wu. That’s more important. I can handle Mrs. Mancini.”

My brother nodded and headed the opposite direction toward the elevators.

Jonas strode alongside me. “Here’s a brief summary of their last quarter financials. I’ve sent a link to their files on the server to your email.”

I wouldn’t know what to do without Jonas. De Lucci Transnational ran itself most days because he was the efficiency behind those square-framed glasses, boyish looks, business-casual chinos, and checkered shirt that completed his buttoned-down appearance.

We strode into the reception area. Mrs. Mancini stood and I immediately noticed the drooped shoulders and short hair. Her face was made up, but she looked different. There were more lines, the dark circles under her eyes hadn’t been there before, and her cheeks seemed more sunken.

“Matteo.”

Jonas opened the door to my office and I motioned her through the entryway.

“Mrs. Mancini, this was an unexpected meeting. Can I get you anything?”

Her scarlet lips thinned. “The café au lait from the coffee shop on the first floor would be nice.”

I looked past her at Jonas who rolled his eyes.

“On it,” my admin said and closed the door behind him when he left.

“Have a seat.” I walked over to the espresso machine. I needed a jolt of caffeine for this. The board meeting put me to sleep.

“I received the notice a month ago,” she started. “I had my accounting department take a look where we could cut expenses.”

The notice was the threat to close down the winery. It had been in the Mancini family for over fifty years and was on acres of prime real estate, not to mention, the expansive Tuscan villa and the connecting structures that with a little restoration would make a great resort. Foodie tourists flocked to the Hudson Valley. My father had broached this to the

Mancinis a long time ago, but they insisted their specialty was wine making.

“I’m going to be blunt,” I cut her off. “For a year you hid your husband’s Alzheimer’s from us. He was the winemaker and the brains behind the operation. The falling profits were linked to the decline in his health. We trusted you and didn’t subject your business through our regular investigative channels.” I woke up my laptop and clicked the email Jonas had sent me, opening the worksheets on their profit and loss statement for the last quarter. I expanded the details of their expense accounts.

“We’re making adjustments.”

“That’s what you’ve been telling my dad for the past three years, and since I’ve taken over...it’s been a year.”

Unlike the haughtiness in the past, there was begging in her eyes now. “Give us another chance.”

“You have two sons. Why are they not helping you?”

“My sons don’t like the winery business. I’ll hire a consultant.”

“With what money?” I leaned forward. “You’re already in the red. And you’ve used up the second loan my father had given you. No bank is willing to touch you. You’re here for more money and I’m not giving it until I see a solid business plan on how the Mancini Winery is going to dig itself out of this mess.”

“You’re denying me a loan?”

“You’re asking for a three-hundred-thousand-dollar check your mouth can’t cash.”

“I want to talk to Cesar.” The haughtiness that I had seen in her returned in full force.

“You’re dealing with me.”

A rap on the door came before it opened with Jonas striding in with a to-go cup of Mrs. Mancini’s coffee.

He handed it to my guest and said, “Conte is outside.”

Did no one make appointments anymore?

“I’ll be with him in a minute.” I returned my attention to her. “We’re done here.”

Mrs. Mancini rose, her chest rising and puffing, indignation evident in every line of her body. “I’m going to talk to your father. You young people have lost the respect for your elders or maybe your mother didn’t teach you how it is with the old ways.”

“Maybe that’s your problem, Mrs. Mancini. Look at your operations. Sticking to the old ways can lead to bankruptcy faster than an egg timer these days.”

Her mouth tightened, nostrils flaring before lifting up her chin and spinning around to walk toward the door. Jonas, who’d been quietly observing, opened it for her.

“One more thing,” I said.

She paused and turned around.

“Mention my mother in that manner again, and I’ll have you banned from this building.”

Her face turned red, her mouth falling open.

“And you can be sure Dad won’t stand for any insult to her either. You’ll have no one to whine to and save your winery.”

She made a haughty sound and exited without another word.

“Need a moment?” Jonas asked.

“No. Let’s get this shitshow over with. Let Nico and Daniel know Conte is here.”

“Already did.”

Seconds later, Gustavo stormed into the office.

My admin lingered by the door, but I nodded for him to leave us.

The old man didn’t waste time. It hadn’t been six hours since my visit to the soup kitchen where I spent almost two hours with Sera Moretti feeding the homeless of New York. I

had ignored the repeated emails from his assistant requesting my presence at the hotel he was staying at. As far as I was concerned, I held the winning cards. Let him come to me. He did not disappoint.

Daniel read the situation correctly. Even if my pursuit of Sera was suspect, they didn't want her reputation tarnished with mine.

The hypocritical men of the Galluzo mafia wanted a modern wife with a virtuous reputation. I doubted Sera was a virgin, but she wasn't a wild child either.

"Gustavo, to what do I owe this honor?"

"You know why I'm here." The old man paced in front of me.

I saw his rage, but I also smelled his desperation. Leaning back in the chair, I linked my fingers over my torso. "Not really. Last we spoke you changed your mind about selling. I don't like games."

Gustavo was a fickle-minded man. Years ago, he approached Dad with an offer of shares of Conte Enterprise. Dad wasn't interested then. When I took over, it became imperative that we had a controlling interest in the company, but Gustavo refused to sell. The timing coincided with the rumors of Sera's possible marriage to Santino. He must have made a deal with Luca, or the Galluzo did and he didn't need us any longer.

He stabbed a finger in my direction. "You're the one playing games. This is an underhanded move, even for you."

If he wouldn't spell it out, then I would. "If you're like everyone who says I shouldn't be pursuing Sera Moretti, the door is right there."

The man stopped pacing and glared at me. "Why bring her into this? It's between you and me."

"Surely, you've experienced the emotion of love at first sight."

"A playboy like you doesn't know the meaning of love."

I ignored his reference to my less than stellar reputation in the tabloids. I never addressed previous girlfriends' exaggerations of my heartlessness in ending relationships. I was clear of my non-commitment from the start. In that regard, Daniel and I shared the same philosophy. Business first, pleasure second. He had something to prove after the Triad murdered his father seven years ago; I had my own way to pave in order to prove I was more than a mongrel born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

Emotional entanglements did not appeal to me.

"Oh, but I do."

He stalked toward my desk, planted his hands on the table, and leaned in. "She doesn't want you. Moretti told me this."

"I wouldn't believe everything Luca tells you."

"He's never going to approve of you going after his niece."

"You're forgetting my aunt Carlotta is a Moretti and she chose to marry a De Lucci."

His face blanched.

"Didn't you offer marriage to her?"

"That's old history." He recovered his composure and waved his hand.

"Is that why you won't sell to me?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I offered the shares to your dad, didn't I?"

"But not me?"

"I don't want a shark having control of a company I helped build. I want to leave Conte Enterprise in good hands."

"And you think Santino is the answer? Does he have any experience in how to run a legitimate business?"

"There are people for this."

"You're contradicting yourself," I said. "How do you know he'd pick the right people once you relinquish control?"

His mouth clamped shut.

“I’m not letting you ruin Sera,” he repeated.

“Surely my reputation isn’t that terrible.” I smiled tauntingly. “Some would say, I’m a good catch.”

He continued to glare. Either he was contemplating a lucrative deal to offer me, or he was considering the letter opener on top of the table to slit my throat. I made a mental note to hide all sharp objects in my office when I had to deal with disgruntled business associates.

“What does Luca Moretti get in all this?” I asked.

“It doesn’t concern you.” The old man sneered. “Stay away from Sera. I’ll take Bowman’s offer back to the board. I couldn’t make that happen without some concessions to the other players, but I believe we could come up with a mutually beneficial agreement.”

I stilled. He was giving in? But I knew better. Conte had played this game a long time. He came prepared with all the likely scenarios.

For Gustavo’s protection as well as to keep the De Lucci name out of public records, Daniel and I used a shell company Bowman Inc as a front for deals like this. It looked good on paper and had a physical address. It even had employees.

I did my best to keep a triumphant smile off my face.

“I’m not wishing you a good day.” Conte spun around and walked to the door.

The fucker.

“The offer has changed,” I called in a steely voice. He was getting a taste of dealing with this De Lucci. “It seems I have more cards to play.”

When he turned to face me again, his eyes could have flayed me alive if they were laser beams. “Stay. Away. From. Sera.”

“You’ll have my new offer within the next hour.”

And he’d just lost five percent of my original offer.

I smiled grimly. Nico was right, the devil had come out to play.

CHAPTER

Six

SERA

“Let’s drink to freedom!” Ivy yelled over the pounding music of the dance club.

“I hear ya, sista.”

We clinked our glasses and sipped our fruity martinis. Three days ago, Tony and Rocco were recalled to Chicago because Luca’s power play with Moscow was over and the new management he was banking on gained control. Though I was fond of my bodyguards, they cramped my movements and tattled on me to my uncle.

I loved dancing and we’d been dancing for an hour when I noticed my friend was favoring her right foot. Poor woman didn’t wear shoes suitable for clubbing. They were killing her feet, but she didn’t want to rain down on my night of freedom and, in true best friend style, suffered for it instead.

Without making it obvious that I’d noted her discomfort, I told her I was tired and dragged her to the bar. We both bopped to the music in the comfort of our barstools while saving our feet from blistering.

“Is Daniel joining us?” I inquired in a casual tone, trying to keep hopefulness out of it.

“He’s wrapping up a deal with a shipping line,” Ivy said.

“It’s midnight,” I said. “Your brother is a such workaholic.” It had been a week since I’d heard from Matteo. I

guess he finally got the message. I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed that he gave up easily.

But the little time we spent together seemed to work. Daniel paid me more attention. Nothing too obvious, or maybe it was my imagination. He rarely joined us when we went clubbing. Normally he left it to Ivy to entertain overseas clients, but since the group of Japanese businessmen were an expensive contract, Daniel tagged along the night before. But tonight was purely for fun. We were at a popular club in a shadier side of Manhattan. Not Daniel's scene at all and I was surprised when he asked us where we were going. He asked the question while looking at me in a way that made my stomach clench with excitement, and I thought I would pass out when he said he would join us. Plus, he prolonged our locked gazes before he smiled his signature half grin and turned away.

No, that definitely wasn't my imagination.

"Midnight is nothing." Ivy sipped her grapefruit martini. "He usually works until Saturday morning, even through the weekend."

"He should slow down."

Ivy angled her eyes at me and her expression said she'd tried doing that ad nauseam.

"Keep trying." I laughed and picked up the olive from my drink and sucked it off the stick. "I've been around you so long, and by osmosis, I know your brother's schedule." I counted off starting with my index finger. "Alarm at five a.m. Half an hour on the treadmill. Half an hour on weights. Half an hour for shower and grooming and other stuff. And by seven he's in front of his laptop checking the stock market and emails."

My friend rolled her eyes. "Don't forget coffee."

"How could I? That's one of his few indulgences. Fancy java." Her brother had the whole barista dream machine in all his residences, and every office he had from New York to Hong Kong.

“I don’t mind being his assistant for the last quarter. That’s usually your busiest time anyway,” I said. “Maybe he needs someone who has his health interests at heart and not because of the paycheck. And not family because stubborn people rarely listen to family.”

“You could.” Ivy regarded me thoughtfully over the rim of her drink. “Although Daniel said he’s relinquishing control of that huge real estate deal to the De Luccis.”

I tried to keep my smile nonchalant and took a sip of my drink. It would be easier for Daniel to make his move on me too with the proximity. Over the last few days since Matteo teased me with a possibility of abandoning my duty to the family, the thought of a future with Daniel played over and over in my head. Why not?

Matteo got the reaction he needed which was why he immediately backed off.

And Daniel stepped up his game. I should be more patient...and more accessible.

“There he is!” Ivy raised her arm and waved.

“Where?” I craned my neck, my heart leaping with a giddiness I hadn’t felt since my high school crush smiled at me.

The bar was packed two people deep. Sadly, my skirt was too tight, and it was an effort not to move without a good chance of ripping it. I was too comfortable in my seat to perch on the foot rung to look anyway. Besides, I didn’t want to look desperate. A little demureness might help. Maybe that was what Daniel wanted. He needed a wife who was...no...he didn’t want a meek wife, did he?

I took special attention with my appearance tonight, making sure my makeup and hair were on point, but by the second hour and no Daniel, I stopped caring. Maybe it was the alcohol and the sheer energy of the club.

“What is he doing with him?” Irritation suffused Ivy’s words.

I was in the process of taking another sip of my drink when I saw the *him* Ivy was referring to.

The alcohol went down the wrong pipe. Good thing I grabbed the drink napkin before I embarrassed myself. I turned toward my friend, coughing and trying not to choke, but my eyes teared up.

Ivy fell silent. She was annoyed with Daniel. But the bulk of her displeasure was directed at her brother's company.

"Ladies," Daniel said. A hand clasped my shoulder and I raised my arm to gesture I needed a second. Ugh, what if my makeup smeared and gave me raccoon eyes? Dammit, I didn't care.

I turned toward Daniel, beamed at him, and gave him a hug. "Sorry, wrong pipe," I said by his ear, glancing past his shoulder into the eyes of Matteo De Lucci.

The corners of Matteo's mouth tipped up in a mocking slant, and my hackles rose. Was I forever a source of his derisive amusement? Not that I cared. I pulled away and asked Daniel, "Did my mascara smear?"

I batted my eyes for good measure. I could feel Ivy's eye roll without looking at her.

"Looks fine to me," Daniel said with a puzzled-male expression. Surely he wasn't this clueless with all the models he dated.

Maybe the cluelessness was a front.

Maybe because it was me.

Maybe our dynamics were changing because he was finally, finally seeing me more than his sister's best friend.

Flustered with the slew of "maybes" coursing through my head, I turned to Ivy for a mascara-check and to regain my composure before I embarrassed her and myself by doing something stupid.

Like, I don't know...kiss Daniel.

She gave me a thumbs up. “Waterproof. Aren’t you glad I convinced you to try it?” Waterproof mascara irritated my eyes, and I hated spending money on makeup I’d throw out regularly, but apparently expensive ones had their merits.

“What are you ladies having?” Daniel asked.

“Martinis.”

“Sounds good to me.” He glanced behind him. “De Lucci?”

“Scotch.”

The guys ordered their drinks.

“Where’s your partner in crime?” Ivy asked Matteo.

“He’s got business tonight,” he said. “What’s the matter? You miss him?”

“Pu-lease.” Ivy turned in her seat to ask the bartender for water. Her low tolerance for alcohol made her cheeks flush after one drink, and sometimes that was enough to make her break out in hives if she didn’t preempt it with an allergy pill. “I just want to know if my evening is going to be ruined.”

“He’s not *that* bad.”

“One of you is the bad brother,” Ivy replied. “It’s just the odds.”

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Daniel needs a wingman.” Matteo winked at his friend.

“What?” Confusion rattled my brain. Did he mean with me? Wasn’t Matteo supposed to pay attention to me and make Daniel jealous? How could he be his wingman?

“Oh, don’t tell me she’s here,” Ivy groused.

A sludge of tacks and distress congealed in my throat. “Who?”

Ivy pointed to the dance floor. “There she is.”

My eyes followed the direction of their gazes to Korean pop princess KC-Yee. She wasn’t as well known in the U.S. as she was in Asia and that was why she hadn’t been mobbed.

Daniel and Ivy brought her name up frequently in relation to their marketing efforts in Asia for their luxury department stores and boutiques.

I sensed Matteo watching my reaction. I angled my head his way and met his gaze straight on, even when the tacks dug deeper, turning distress into despair, making it bleed into my chest.

His eyes were inscrutable, his jaw hard. I would even say, he was pissed. Wait, why was he pissed?

The air around the bar became suffocating. I drained the rest of my martini.

“Watch my seat.” I slid off my stool and grabbed Daniel, planting him in it, trying to act natural, talk natural, and not like my emotions had plunged to my toes after reaching an initial high.

“Where are you going?” Ivy asked. “I’ll come with you.”

“I’ll be fine.” I couldn’t face my friend at that moment. I was barely managing a neutral face. I felt exposed under Matteo’s regard and that exacerbated the reality of the moment. Because he knew. Those damned piercing eyes of his were telling me he knew I had hoped. That in the past week, I’d fixated on a future with Daniel. “You’ve been complaining about your feet hurting. I just need fresh air.”

“I’ll go with her,” Matteo said. He was the last person I wanted with me, but I didn’t have the composure to argue and inserted myself into the thickening crowd. I cursed my tight skirt and my short legs and my high heels from preventing a fast escape from heartache, at the betrayal nipping at my heels.

Ivy never encouraged my crush on her brother. At that time, I had chosen my path that would lead to an arranged marriage.

But in the last week, I had taken a detour. Daniel had shown signs of romantic interest, but he hadn’t declared any feelings which was making me question if I’d imagined his increased affection.

It was Matteo I felt betrayed by the most. He had to know that Daniel was interested in the pop princess. Didn't he mention he was privy to Daniel's extra-curricular activities?

I passed the ladies' room and strutted straight for the exit that led to the balcony. Huddles of clubgoers dotted the expansive outdoor area, but it wasn't crowded enough to prevent me from seeking a level of isolation. The cool September breeze was just what I needed to clear my head and hopefully regain my pride.

"Sera..."

Without looking at Matteo, I demanded, "Why are you here?"

"I'm sorry."

I faced him. "For what?"

"For misreading Daniel." He nodded in the direction of the club. "Look, he might still be in denial."

The thread holding my composure snapped. "Stop! You're trying to make me feel better. And you know how lame that sounds? It's embarrassing." The pain in my chest migrated into a throb in my head, and my cheeks were burning like I'd walked into a furnace. I wished none of the past week had happened. Mortified by what I allowed myself to hope, I acted like a teenager whose crush finally noticed her. I forgot who I was.

Luca's voice from long ago echoed in my head.

"You're a Moretti. You do not cry over a boy."

"Leave me alone. I hear you got what you wanted."

Matteo shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned against the balcony railings. "I'm fine right here."

I huffed a bitter laugh. "So you can witness my humiliation?"

"That was never my intent."

"So what? Are you going to knock some sense into Daniel so he can forget his pop princess?"

He raised a brow. “You want me to?”

Oh God, Sera, this is what your daydreaming has reduced you to. I directed my ire at the man in front of me. His scheme landed me in this emotional quicksand. “You used me for your end, it’s only fair that you help me with mine.”

“I used you?” His brow arched. “You left me holding a three-thousand-dollar check, and to get closer to you, I had to make a donation to the Merciful Sisters.”

“Consider it penance for your sins.”

He barked a laugh. “You probably have more sins that need penance than I do.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

He invaded my space, the heady aftershave I was trying to ignore assaulted my senses. This man smelled so damn fine. After the time we shared at the soup kitchen, I found it hard to hate him.

“Tell me why you were at St. Catherine’s last Friday,” he asked.

“I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“You feel guilty about helping your uncle and Chicago.”

My chin jutted up at him. “I don’t know what you’re smoking, but back the hell off.”

Our lips were millimeters apart, and my breathing hitched, but I refused to be the first one to back away.

His head lowered.

“Don’t you dare,” I whispered.

“Aren’t you a little curious?” His mouth ghosted over mine.

“No, thanks.”

He inhaled sharply, and before I knew what was happening, he was shielding me from someone.

A group of someones.

I peered around him.

The newcomer looked familiar. Like Matteo, he was in a close-fitting suit. Unlike Matteo, he was surrounded by a group of men that screamed mafia soldiers.

“Matteo De Lucci,” the man sneered. “Might I have my fiancée back?”

I realized who this was.

Santino Conte.

CHAPTER

Seven

MATTEO

“You’re Santino?” Sera sputtered.

Without taking my eyes off the five hostile men who confronted us, I cocked my head to the side and addressed her, “What’s wrong with you? You agree to marry a man, sight unseen?”

“I haven’t agreed.”

“That’s not what Luca told me.” Santino detached from the group and took a threatening step forward.

Sera kept trying to get in front of me, but every cell in my body screamed to protect her.

“You misunderstood, then.” She managed to get around me, but I corralled her waist and dragged her against my chest. Sera’s ass wiggled against my crotch and the motion coupled with adrenaline gave me a boner.

Fuck.

“Hand her over,” Santino growled.

“Wrong city,” I told him. “You don’t give orders in this town.”

“This is not your territory, De Lucci. This area is ruled by The Turk.”

“You think he’ll be happy to see you causing trouble in his club?” I asked.

“I have an arrangement with the Rossis.”

“As far as I know, this is still Turk territory, separate from the Rossis.” Alessandro “Sandro” Rossi, also known as The Turk, was an associate and not considered a made man because he was the bastard son of the former Rossi boss and not a full-blooded Italian.

Sera continued to struggle while I fought to stay focused on the threat. “Stop it,” I hissed in her ear.

When Conte exposed the underflap of his suit, revealing a gun, Sera fell limp in my arms.

“I hope that’s a gun poking at me,” she whispered.

I choked on a laugh. “Sorry to disappoint you, baby.”

The danger of Santino finally sunk into her consciousness and she stopped struggling in favor of going behind me.

Good girl.

Santino didn’t like that one bit. “Are you two done making a fool of me? I’m willing to overlook this insult.” He held out his hand. “Come, *tesoro*.”

I heard a hushed “ew” from behind me. From the looks of it, Santino Conte was rapidly diminishing as a prospective husband.

“I’m not going with you,” she informed him. “And you’re attracting attention. You can’t go spaghetti western over here.”

“You think I’m gonna go pussy like these American Italians?”

“Well you *are* in America, and you shouldn’t trust what you see in movies.”

The man scowled at Sera, concealing the gun in his jacket once more because he realized she was right. “This is not over.”

They backed away like a quintet of actors on stage, and before Santino turned, he gestured for his men to leave.

I didn't tell Sera I didn't have a gun on me. The club checked for weapons, but that was to enter the premises, not the perimeter, including this balcony, which had its own separate stairs from the parking lot.

"He likes Clint Eastwood movies," she said.

"What? You exchanged dating profiles?"

"Ha. Ha. No. Zio Gus told me."

I texted Nico. "The Galluzo showed up. Send backup." If it were just me and Daniel, we could outmaneuver them, but I wasn't risking Sera or Ivy.

I grabbed her hand. "Let's go."

"You mean leave now? They might be waiting for us."

I shot her an irritated glance and she got my message and shrugged. Still, I told her, "Inside."

Though the club was in a shady neighborhood, people flocked here to be seen. Rich kids who wanted to hang out with gangsters to look tough or wanting a taste of the dangerous. Wall Street types also came to this neighborhood to score drugs.

I knew the owner, Alessandro, quite well. Or I used to. This club and the territory around it were given to him after he did a big job at only nineteen.

I hadn't seen him around lately. The De Lucci and Rossi crime families were in a cold war. My concern lay elsewhere.

The inside of the club was safe, the perimeter was suspect because those who refused to surrender their guns hung outside and the whole neighborhood was dicey.

Of all the nights Nico had to work, it had to be tonight. I was aware of our playboy reputation when we prowled the New York nightlife, but it was a front to keep a pulse of criminal enterprises everywhere, and the evenings were primetime for freaks to come out and play.

Our people had lost track of Santino the other day. With Gustavo changing his plans and selling part of his shares to me, that put a chink in the Galluzo's plan to control Conte Enterprise. But the old man still had the remaining shares up his sleeves, and right now, not a single entity had a majority stake in the corporation.

I had no intention of seeing Sera again, but when Daniel mentioned meeting the women tonight, I had an urge to see her one last time.

I'm an idiot.

She was nothing to me.

Or she was supposed to be nothing.

She wanted Daniel. And Daniel wanted her but was too chickenshit to make a move. He told me he made an effort in the past few days, but he changed his mind again. He said it was too soon. He said he had too much on his plate to consider a serious relationship. He said he probably should leave Sera alone since she was Ivy's friend.

He pissed me off with his indecision.

I should leave them to their infatuations because it was affecting my better judgement. My friend tried to undo what interest he'd shown her by making a play for the Korean pop singer and I went along with it at first, until I saw Sera's face.

Guilt twisted my insides.

I got what I wanted out of this deal without Sera even agreeing or *knowing* the real reason behind it, and in the end, she was left holding on to nothing. She became collateral damage.

I didn't regret following her outside. If I hadn't, God knew what Santino would have done.

Another plan formed in my mind and I ignored the alarm bells that trilled with it. I didn't trust Daniel to keep her safe. Not with Santino and his men running around New York. She needed my protection. Luca shouldn't have pulled her bodyguards, but he didn't know what we did.

Because we interfered with Gustavo, the threat to Sera was no longer the Russian mafia. It was Santino. In a way it was good she saw the man's true colors.

I owed her that much at least.

This was not the nineteenth century. Sera, for all her seeming devotion to family, didn't seem the type to agree blindly. She would consider options. She wasn't archaic in her beliefs, that was for sure, but she was anchored by duty.

Some of the Galluzo like Santino would see her rejection as an insult.

Impatiently, I weaved through the crowded club, tugging Sera along with me. Clubgoers glared at me for my rudeness, but I was on edge.

I was sure Santino had more than four men with him. He wasn't lying when he said he had arrangements with the Rossis. The Harlem gang came to mind. Daniel was still at the bar with his sister, embroiled in an argument. Well, all their sibling disagreements could wait.

"We need to leave." I pulled a couple of hundreds from my wallet and threw it on the bar.

Daniel's brows drew together.

"Santino is here."

His face grew hard and he nodded. He turned to his sister. "We have trouble."

"What?"

"This is not a drill, Ivy."

I stared down a guy to vacate his seat and planted Sera on it.

Her mouth fell open. "Excuse me? What is this manhandling?"

"Oh, I don't know," Ivy said. "I find it hot."

"Since when are you on his side?" She glared at her friend.

"I'm not. I'm just saying it like it is."

I left the two to argue, biting back a slight smile, but my eyes were alert to the surroundings. Scanning the bouncing people on the dance floor and the multiple lines of patrons crisscrossing in front of us, I marked several potential threats as the throbbing of the music receded.

I typed another message to Nico. “ETA?”

“Five minutes. Trevor’s group is closest.”

I pocketed the phone.

Exactly five minutes later, a message from an unknown number popped up on my screen. “Back of the club. Two Patrols.”

I was glad I brought an old Subaru instead of the Jaguar. One of the guys could pick it up later.

“Let’s go.” I helped Sera down from her seat and proceeded to the back of the club.

“Where are you taking me?” Sera yanked her arm from my hold, but I grabbed it again, and this time, it was a challenge to get her to move and it was almost as if I was dragging her.

My molars ground against each other.

We exited the club, my eyes immediately scanning the crowd outside. People here appeared rougher than the ones inside. I wasn’t sure if any of them were part of The Turk’s security or the type looking for trouble.

A couple of guys were smirking at my attempt to keep Sera by my side. But more than a few were glaring at me too.

“You okay, *mamacita*?” one of them called out.

“Are you seriously going to cause trouble here?” I gritted at her.

When I opened the door to the Patrol, she dug in her heels, letting me know she wasn’t getting in it.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

I stopped, clinging to my temper because I needed Sera to listen to me. I loved sparring with her, but now was not the

time.

I let her go and shoved my hands in my pockets because I had the oddest desire to wrap them around her neck. “Are you willing to marry Santino?”

“Of course not.”

“You know why he’s here, why he wants to take you?”

“Gustavo is my godfather and he’s going to have his balls if he hurts me. Not to mention he’ll start a war with Chicago.”

“You think that psycho cares?”

Sera considered this briefly. “Are you talking about my uncle or Santino?”

“Hey, move that thing.” One of the club’s bouncers tapped the SUV’s hood. Trevor rolled down the windows. “Just a second, man. We’re having a lover’s spat.”

If the situation were different, I would have found that statement hilarious, but amusement wasn’t flowing in my veins at the moment.

“De Lucci,” a low voice said behind me.

Fuck. I didn’t want to deal with him too. I turned to face the man known as The Turk. We were almost the same height and build. He could have passed as our brother, but his features were sharper. Everyone knew he was the Rossis’ enforcer. Everyone knew if you want to get a hit done with precision, you called The Turk. But most of all, everyone knew if he wasn’t a half-blooded Italian like me, he would have been next in line as boss to the Rossi crime family.

“What’s going on here?” He nodded to Sera. “Doesn’t seem like you to force a woman into your car.”

“I’m protecting her.”

He crossed his arms. “You really want to get in between Conte and his bride?”

“What the hell?” Sera whipped out her phone, swiped at it, and held it to her ear. “You guys must be part of an exclusive phone tree I’m not aware of. Well, let’s get it straight from the

horse's mouth because I, for one, had no idea I was betrothed to anyone."

I grabbed the phone from her, dropped it on the ground, and smashed it under my shoe.

"Was that fucking necessary?" she yelled.

"It's none of your business," I told Sandro, then jerked my head at Sera toward the Patrol. "Get in the fucking car. Now."

Without another word, she got in.

My brows shot to my hairline. Huh. Maybe the only way to get through to her was not give her too many options.

"We're out of here," I said. "Sorry to bother you."

"Not so fast." He got within a millimeter of my face.

"Mind backing up a step?" I asked softly.

He gave me a little space, but not much. It was a pissing contest. "If you're going to cause trouble, I don't want it anywhere near my club. Got it?"

"That's why we're leaving."

"Not in my neighborhood either."

I got into the SUV beside Sera. "The first strike won't be mine. Can't say the same for the other guy but..." I shrugged. "Outta my hands, man."

I yanked the door and shut off the crowd and The Turk.

"I can't believe you destroyed my phone," Sera griped the second our vehicle started moving. I ignored her lament and asked Trevor, "Any chatter in the area?"

"No," he said. "But on my way here, I could feel the neighborhood on edge."

I looked at Sera. "You should have gone back to Chicago."

"That could easily be arranged"—she got into my face—"if you hadn't destroyed my freaking phone! And I came with Ivy. Why were we separated?"

My phone rang. And I didn't need to look at the screen to see who it was. "Yeah."

"My sister is demanding to talk to Sera."

I could hear Ivy's rapid-fire rant.

"Would you wait," Daniel told his sister.

"Tell that son of a bitch if I don't talk to Sera right now I'm calling Luca."

"I saw you destroy her phone. Was that necessary?" Daniel asked me.

Instead of answering him, I said, "Hand the phone over to your sister."

"Sera?" Ivy demanded.

"No."

"Fucker. If I don't talk to her right this second—"

"Keep it short—"

I handed Sera the phone, ignoring the death glare she shot my way. I met Trevor's eyes in the rearview mirror. I could see his smirk from the crinkle of his eyes.

"Nothing to see here," I told him.

"Sure, boss."

"Don't call Luca," Sera said. "Let me find out what the hell is going on first. No, I don't think he'll hurt me."

I wasn't sure if she meant me or Santino, probably both.

The SUV carrying Daniel and his sister crossed W 143 Street. When we were about to follow them, three vehicles joined our convoy from the left.

Trevor's phone on the dash went off. He put it on speaker.

It was Nico.

"About time you got here," I told him.

"Traffic."

“Head to Hell’s Kitchen.” The third vehicle that arrived with Nico followed their tail while Nico’s and the second vehicle sandwiched our Patrol. I still couldn’t believe Santino confronted us at the dance club. Did he think Sera would just go with him or did Luca give his blessing?

Nico’s vehicle up ahead hit a traffic light essentially breaking up our convoy. We told Daniel not to wait for us.

Sera stopped talking to Ivy. “Wait, you’re not taking me to Brooklyn?”

“It’s not safe.”

“Gotta go, Ivy.” Sera ended the call and poked the phone at my chest. “It’s not your place to protect me.”

“Ah, see...” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I think it is.”

“Because you were seen with me?” she scoffed. “You can take me straight to the airport and I’ll return to Chicago. I’ll be out of your hair.” She averted her gaze. “You don’t need me anymore.”

I flattened my mouth. I was blinded by my single objective of getting Gustavo to cave, and now that I was successful, it made me sick to my stomach that Sera got hurt. Damn Daniel’s fickleness. He was worse than a squirrel wanting to cross the road.

“Daniel’s an idiot.”

She reared back as if surprised by my admission. “You just hate admitting you were wrong reading him. I never thought I was his type anyway.”

“You can do better than him.”

“Wow, that’s a strange compliment seeing that you’re more his friend than mine.” She patted my hand. “I forgive you for misreading your friend.”

The spikes of guilt pierced deeper.

The light turned green, and before I could say anything else, Nico came over our comms. “We’ve got company. A blue

van just pulled in front of us.”

“Daniel, we have probable hostiles,” I said. “Anything on your end?”

“We’re clear so far.”

“They probably had a plant watching at the club,” Trevor said.

“You think?” I muttered. Turning to Sera, I said, “No matter what happens, stay in the Patrol. It’s bulletproof.”

“I’m not worried,” she retorted. “If Santino wanted me as a bride, he wouldn’t want me dead.” She shrugged. “I can’t say the same about you guys.”

Trevor burst out laughing, and so did many people on the comms.

He looked in the rearview mirror. “Since Matteo refuses to introduce us, I’m Trevor, by the way.”

“She doesn’t need to know you,” I snapped. “Keep your eyes forward.”

“Sure, boss.”

“Are you an asshole to your employees?”

“He doesn’t work for me.”

“Oh...” Sera’s eyes widened. “Boss as in...”

“Not that either.”

“Then...”

Exasperated because I had no plans of explaining whoever the fuck Trevor was, I said, “It’s none of your business.”

But she was mine. If Gustavo wanted Sera kept out of it, he should have sold me all of his shares. Now he was playing a dangerous game, pitting me against the Galluzo, and possibly Chicago. Was that the old man’s play all along? I didn’t think he wanted a war. Or maybe this was still about Aunt Carlotta’s rejection thirty years ago.

The word vendetta originated with Italians and revenge could last generations.

Fuck. I hated mob drama.

A force jolted our vehicle, sending the Patrol spinning.

Sera screamed.

Shouting erupted.

“Fuck, black SUV. Blocked you off.”

The sound of automatic weapons exploded all around us.

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” Sera put her arms over her head.

“Stay down,” I said without looking at the woman beside me.

“I’m already staying down,” Sera shouted.

Trevor handed me two nine millimeters, a sub-machine gun, and a comms device.

“Are you going out there?” she asked shrilly.

“Stay in the car with Trevor.”

“What?”

I fixed the comms and made sure it was working before patting Trevor’s shoulder to let him know I was exiting the vehicle. I closed the door and crouched. Our SUV was cut off from our rear and front escorts. Those assailants were busy firing at Nico and his men in front of us, and the rest of our crew behind us. Six hostiles in front of us with two of them down. No casualties from our side yet.

Sera was right. Santino wasn’t going to harm her, so she wasn’t in immediate danger. But he planned to get rid of us by getting rid of our backup. Did he think I wouldn’t join the fight? Deciding to help Nico up ahead, I crouch-walked to the front of the Patrol and took position at the wheelbase. I snuck a peek around it.

Just my luck, an assailant from the vehicle that cut us off turned and saw me. He was wearing a mask. All of them were. But his plaid shirt and loose jeans gave him away. Harlem gang.

He alerted his friends and started firing at me while running for cover. His bullets bounced off the hood.

The barrel of my gun followed him, and when I had my shot, I squeezed the trigger. He jerked back and fell to the ground. His partner dragged him behind the SUV and continued firing at me.

“Nico. Status?” I shouted.

“Three down,” my brother said.

“These men are crazy. What the fuck?” Trevor said.

Attacking us didn’t make sense. They had no strategy except to fire at us. Unless.

When there was a brief lull in the gunfire, I said, “Trevor, check if Daniel is okay.”

“He’s fine. They’ve made it to Malcom X.”

They weren’t a diversion either.

“What the hell are they doing?” I asked Nico, who had a better vantage point of the remaining attackers.

“They’re bugging out,” Nico said.

“Well, that’s no fun,” one of our guys chimed in.

“I had enough fun,” another one said. “I need sleep and a warm body.”

“Get the plates?” I asked. It was probably useless since chop shops were a common racket for these gangs and they would have an endless supply of fake or stolen plates.

“Yup,” my brother and Trevor acknowledged.

Sirens sounded in the distance. “Police are coming, that’s why.”

I opened the passenger door and slid in beside Trevor. “Let’s go.” I turned to look at Sera. Her eyes searched my face and she craned her neck to look down my body.

I grinned. “I’m in one piece.”

Her eyes snapped to mine again, and there was a hint of irritation in them. “Why is the Harlem gang after us?”

I expected to find her in tears, but her question caught me by surprise.

She waved her hand at my unasked question. “Trevor filled me in. Besides, they didn’t look like Santino’s men.”

Trevor gunned the engine and floored the gas, jolting our vehicle forward and causing Sera to grab the handlebar and swear.

We closed in on Nico’s vehicle, tailing closely while our rear vehicle caught up behind us. Our convoy drove in a tight formation. We weren’t giving anyone a second chance to split us up.

“They’re not, but Harlem has loose alliances with the Rossis and that’s our link to the Galluzo.”

She waited for me to say more, but until I had a handle on Santino’s motives, I wasn’t feeding her any more speculation.

“What’s next?” she asked.

“You’re coming home with me.”

CHAPTER

Eight

SERA

“You don’t have to take responsibility for me.” I didn’t want to go home with Matteo. My uncle would lose his shit. “If you just let me call Luca, I’m sure he could arrange my return to Chicago.”

“Too dangerous.”

“What? You think Santino is having the airports watched? Worst comes to worst, I can ask Daniel for a favor. They have private jets.”

“Less complicated.” He turned away from me to take a call.

Less complicated for whom? I wanted to scream, and instead, I stewed in the back of the vehicle while he ended one call to make another.

Every time I tried to get his attention, he’d hold a finger up at me to wait.

Well, I’m not one of his lackeys.

“Where are we going, *Trevor*?” I gave up trying to get Matteo to give me answers.

“Hell’s Kitchen. You’ll be safe there.”

“Didn’t it occur to both of you that I might be in danger exactly because I’m with you guys?”

“We’re not clear about that yet,” Matteo answered me before returning to his phone call.

“You know how we’ll be clear? Ask Luca,” I fumed. I never thought there would come a day when I would miss my phone. My uncle kept tabs on me through it. It was like he knew when I was up to something and he would check in. It annoyed the heck out of me. But now more than ever, I missed his meddling.

Both men didn’t appear to hear me.

I punched the back of Matteo’s shoulder. “Hey. I won’t be ignored. I want to talk to Luca tonight. Not tomorrow. Not the day after, but within the next hour.”

Matteo ended his call and threw his phone on the dash, turning to face me. I had his full attention. “No need for violence, baby.”

“Vio—?” I scrunched up my face when I remembered I gave him a not-so-subtle tap. “That was a nudge, and stop calling me baby.”

The flash of white teeth belied the wildness still in his eyes. He’d just been in a shootout and he was in adrenaline euphoria. I was sure it was Matteo who took down the man pelting our vehicle with a barrage of bullets. Why was I so calm about this? It wasn’t the first time I’d been in such situations, but I’d been around Luca who I trusted to keep me safe.

Did that mean I trusted Matteo?

“Sounds right. Especially since you’re my girlfriend.” His maddening smile grew wider. “I’m surprised you didn’t demand to talk to Luca right this second.” His phone pinged with a message. He grabbed it from the dashboard and grimaced. “Especially since he’s been blowing up my phone.”

“Is that him?”

Matteo nodded.

My instinct was to grab the phone and call Luca, but my crazy zio needed to be handled carefully.

“We need to come up with a good reason why I’m with you. He probably tried to reach me—”

“He’s blowing up Daniel’s and Ivy’s phones too.”

“And did they talk to him?”

He chuckled. “I think they’re afraid to since they don’t know what plans I have for you.”

That sounded ominous. “What are you planning?” The words snagged in my throat.

“Not a conversation for the car.” Matteo looked ahead to check where we were. “We’re almost there.”

I recognized the bars and the streets of Hell’s Kitchen. The rearview mirror clock showed it was one thirty. Judging by the crowds milling in front of the bars’ patios, New York was living up to its name as the city that never sleeps.

The lead vehicle with Nico honked twice before it broke off to a side street. Our Patrol surged ahead. We arrived at a brick building with a shop called Jabbin’ Java Café. Trevor drove the vehicle to the back alley of the building where a cellar door indicated there was a basement.

Trevor pulled up next to concrete steps leading to a gray metal back door. Matteo got out and helped me down from the SUV. Off to the corner, I saw a silhouette of a man, the ember from a lit cigarette not enough to discern his features.

Matteo guided me to the entrance. “We’re in De Lucci territory. Our men are everywhere.”

“Is that why you brought me here?”

“Yes.” He punched in a code at the door and a mechanical sound turned the keypad light to green.

When we entered the building, a musty smell of leather and sweat assailed my nostrils.

“I’ll give you a tour later,” Matteo said, but nodded to the room on our right. “That’s a boxing gym called The Grindhouse, which is also the name of the building.

“It’s three stories,” he continued. “My brother Renz—Lorenzo, has the second floor.” Typical of old New York structures, this one had a rickety narrow staircase. We ascended it with Matteo leading, and I had no idea why he was holding my hand. He inspired conflicting reactions. My brain was telling me to pull my hand out of his grasp, but a warm fuzzy feeling bloomed in my chest that made it impossible to yank my hand away.

But something didn’t add up...

“You don’t stay here, right? Don’t you live in the Upper East Side?”

A chuckle filtered down to me.

“I’m flattered you know where I live.”

“You know where I live.”

“Got me there. You’re a worthy adversary, Sera Moretti.”

“I didn’t realize we’re at that level.” My lungs were starting to protest, and my legs were getting tired. I didn’t exercise, but I loved power walking. I’d never gotten on a stair master in my life, and although the house in Chicago had an elevator, my room there was on the second floor. “How much farther?”

He paused at the second-floor landing and looked at me with an amused slant to his mouth. “Should I carry you?”

My cheeks heated. “Absolutely not.” I peered up the next flight of steps. “So what’s this place to you exactly? A love nest?”

He barked a laugh. “Looks like I need to set you straight about my reputation.” Matteo tugged my hand along and we resumed our ascent. “But I won’t. All you need to know is you’re the first woman I’ve brought here.”

“Really?” My tone was full of doubt.

“Ask Nico,” he said. “I’ll have to warn you though, it’s usually a bachelor pad. Don’t expect any frills.”

My mind went on a different track. As far as I'd gleaned from Luca, the De Lucci side of the family Aunt Carlotta had married into were the legitimate side, but that didn't mean they didn't participate in illegal activities. They could provide a safe haven for anyone in the family who needed to hide for a while. I'd lived that life. I hated lockdowns. There was one time when Nonno went to war with an Albanian mob boss and Chicago was too hot, so he sent me to Gustavo for a few months.

When we reached the top floor, Matteo took out his keys to open the door. I spied another staircase that led farther up.

"That leads to a rooftop garden."

My eyes perked up. "You're serious?"

"Renz grows his herbs and shit for the café."

"Oh." I was always fond of rooftop gardens.

Matteo led me into the apartment and flicked on the lights. This wasn't an apartment. It was a hybrid loft/apartment living space that took up the entire floor. I loved the exposed white brick and the vast row of windows that gave a glimpse of the Manhattan skyline. The kitchen was open to two seating areas but there were other rooms walled off to give privacy.

One window drew me to look into the night. "I bet the view is better on the roof." The Manhattan night sky wasn't new to me. But whenever I stayed in the city, it was either in the Wus' luxurious penthouse on Fifth Avenue or at a hotel.

"To be honest, I haven't been up there since last year when Renz had a party." He emitted a wry chuckle as his reflection in the glass moved closer to me. Warmth emanated from behind me. I could almost feel rather than hear his deep-throated chuckle. I was responding to it like an addict. It was as though he didn't laugh often, but could find amusement in situations. I recalled his full-blown laughter when I called this place his love nest. "You appear to like rooftops? We can head up there if it'll make this conversation go easier."

His words reminded me I should start thinking of our current predicament, and not what I think made Matteo sexy.

Putting distance between us sounded like a good idea. And no, I didn't think I would want to share a rooftop interlude with him. It was too intimate. "Can I have some water?"

He speared me with those eyes before he walked over to the kitchen. I followed him.

He tore into a pallet of bottled water. "These are cold."

"I need to call Luca."

"And you will."

"Like half an hour ago."

"Didn't you say within the next hour?" He untwisted a cap from one and handed it to me.

I sighed. "We're almost within that hour." The last thing I wanted was for Luca to show up in New York. "And I only said that because we need to come up with a reason so he won't have you whacked."

"Are you perpetuating his psycho reputation? I'm sure your uncle wouldn't want to start a war with my family."

"He can be reasoned with, but he's very protective of me," I said.

"So I've heard."

I wanted to chuck this bottled water at this head. Why wasn't he taking me seriously? "You can drop me off at the Wus. That would be the best solution."

"No."

"Matteo! I'm trying to save your life!"

That sexy chuckle rumbled again. Gah!

"I have a better solution," he said, taking a sip from his own bottled water. "Let's give this fake dating a try."

My mouth gaped. No words came. After a few seconds, I snapped it shut and stomped to the living room. So much for thinking this space was cozy. The furniture was decidedly masculine in brown leather. In fact, every color seemed to be blue or brown.

“You’re crazy,” I declared, suddenly tired, and plopped onto the couch. It must be the hike up the stairs or it could be the thought that at this moment, Luca was boarding his private plane to hunt down Matteo.

“On the contrary. After Santino showed up to try to kidnap you, I think it’s very gentlemanly of me to defend your honor,” Matteo said. “Maybe you need a man of my reputation and family clout to discourage him.” He paused. “You’re no longer considering him for marriage, are you?”

“Absolutely not,” I snapped. My stomach turned at the thought that Luca even considered Santino. But I’d given up trying to understand my uncle. He was psychotically protective, but at times when it suited the greater good of the family, he was willing to take risks. “Besides,” I added, “I’m not sure fake dating is possible. I don’t like you.”

He sat beside me, leaned closer, his lips twitching at the corners, his stunning blue gaze focused on me. “Not even a little?”

“I know what you’re doing. You’re trying to mesmerize me with your eyes. I’m onto you.”

His face turned ruddy, the twitching of his mouth became twisty. Matteo De Lucci was trying not to laugh. He disguised it with a clearing of the throat, and when he spoke, his voice was low and deep. “You find my eyes mesmerizing?”

I rolled mine. “You know what turns me off? A man who’s fishing for compliments.”

Matteo shook his head, the laughter he was holding back gusted past his lips. Suddenly, he was in front of me, on his knees.

He cupped my knees together. It was an intimate gesture, but I was going to punch him in the face if he tried to get between my legs.

The featherlight caress of his thumbs at the top of my knees sent goose bumps of confused sensations up my thighs. “How can I convince you this is going to work?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t throw Daniel in my face again.”

He sighed. “After his stunt tonight, he’s a lost cause. Let him flounder. You deserve better.”

I stared at him for a long time. He sounded sincere. If it was my choice to stay with Matteo, my uncle would back off. Luca never stuck his nose in my love life again after the time I threatened to denounce the family when he nearly killed my college boyfriend for taking my virginity. That was the most mortifying experience ever. I didn’t speak to Luca for nearly a year.

But if Luca caught a whiff of coercion, Matteo’s days were numbered.

“We need to act natural,” I said.

“I’ve no problem with that. I look forward to sparring with you.”

“How is that going to prove that we like each other?”

His eyes were alive with mischief, amusement, and something else. I was trying very much to ignore the fluttering in my belly with his closeness. With his hands on my knees, I did nothing to knock off his grip.

But I didn’t like lying to myself and admitted, “We seem to...get along.”

“I agree. I’ve never had as much fun with a woman before.”

“I feel sorry for you.”

“Are you saying you’ve enjoyed another man’s company more?”

I looked away. “I don’t keep score.”

He put a finger under my chin to bring my eyes back to his. His face was closer and breathing became a chore. “Why can’t you look at me?”

“Because I might not be able to resist slapping that smirk off your face.”

“Such violence.” His smirk became more pronounced. “Or should I say, such passion.” His lips were almost touching

mine.

He leaned in, and I was leaning back, the hands on my knees slid a bit higher and I was made aware of my short skirt.

“We need to call Luca.”

“In a minute,” he said. Then his mouth was on mine. His kiss was gentle at first, teasing expertly, seducing my lips to part beneath his. When I obliged, his tongue swept in, and I was lost to his kisses. He wedged his way between my legs. My panties felt damp and my nipples felt scratchy against my bra. I needed him closer, needed to feel the friction of him at my core, needed his weight dominating me and pressing me against the couch. One hand swept behind my skull, the other gripped my thigh. Need and tension rolled off him and I moaned into his mouth.

Matteo tore away and sprang to his feet. “Fuck.”

Before I could regain my equilibrium, he was halfway across the room with his back to me. A hand raked through his hair and his shoulders rose and fell as hard and fast as my breathing.

“Ooo...kay...what was that?”

He pivoted slightly, throwing an arm my way. “That proved we won’t be able to keep our hands off each other.”

“Okay,” I said again. I was still pulsing between my legs. I wasn’t sure I’d be protesting if he laid me on the couch and had a little foreplay. No sex of course, but I wouldn’t mind a dry-hump orgasm. My cheeks heated at all the images that flashed through my head and I pushed away the guilt that this felt like cheating on Daniel. Which I was not. He made that crystal clear at the club. “Seems we have physical chemistry at least. Enough to fool people that we like each other.”

“Are you agreeing?”

“You’re growing on me,” I teased, buying myself time to recover from our encounter. “I guess you’re on a level of I don’t want Luca to demand your head on a silver platter.”

Matteo smiled, but his face looked strained. There was also a noticeable bulge in his pants. I was surprisingly pleased I put it there.

“Let’s call Luca.” He slid out his phone and put it to his ear. Apparently my uncle answered on the first ring.

“Calm the fuck down,” he said. “She’s fine.” Matteo looked at me, shaking his head as he crossed over and handed me the phone.

“Luca?”

“Are you all right?” he roared.

“Of course I am,” I said. The worst thing to do when Luca was in spitting dragon mode was tell him to calm down.

“What are you doing with De Lucci?”

“Though I loathe to explain my dating life to you after what I said the last time about not dating him, it turns out we have...” I glanced at the man in question and he shrugged. “Uhm...something.”

“What something?”

“Luca...” I heard him barking orders to someone. “Where are you?” A series of doors slammed.

“At the house,” he said. “I was about to leave for the airport.”

“To come here?”

“What did you expect when the Wus refused to produce you, and De Lucci wasn’t answering my calls?”

“If you want to raise a stink about something, then you need to tell Santino Conte to back off.”

“He’s ignoring my calls too.” I could hear the frustration in his voice. “You were about to tell me about that something. It better not be what I think it is.”

“Look. Matteo and I might have a...spark after all,” I said. “And we’re trying to figure things out, hopefully without your interference.”

Silence. A kind of weighted silence that made me go through several scenarios in my head. None of them ending well for Matteo.

Finally, Luca said, “Your nonno and I did not raise you to be naive, but I’m going to say it anyway. Keep your eyes open for his motive. I’m not saying you’re not worth it, *cara*. No man deserves you if you want my honest opinion.”

“Aw.” Luca could be so sweet.

“Put De Lucci back on the phone.” I bit my lower lip. I kind of knew what Luca was going to say to my pretend boyfriend.

After I returned his phone, I watched Matteo’s face as Luca talked to him. A muscle pulsed his jaw, but when he glanced at me, he hitched his shoulders and continued to listen.

After almost two minutes, all Matteo said was, “Understood.” Then he ended the call and tossed the phone on the leather couch.

He reached for me and dragged me up to him, plastering our fronts together. I felt so petite beside him. I had kicked off my shoes and I only came up to his chest.

“You’re shorter,” he said.

“Boy, you need to work on your romance game,” I retorted.

He leaned over and gave my lips a playful kiss.

“Are we practicing?”

Matteo’s eyes gleamed with mischief. “Are we still calling this practicing?”

I pushed away from him and my hands landed on my hips. I glared up at him. “Let’s get one thing straight. We’re fake-dating, right?”

Irritation flashed through his features. “Yes.”

I pointed to the couch. “That’s not going to happen again.”

“Can’t promise that, Sera,” he said gruffly. It looked like there was more he wanted to say, but his mouth compressed into a thin line.

“Okay. I feel like this could get complicated if we don’t set boundaries.” I thought about Daniel. All the excitement of the night temporarily eclipsed the pain of my humiliation and short-lived hope. I could kick myself for wanting anything to do with him given how he behaved all week only to retreat at the club. Exhaustion slammed into me. “What time is it?”

Matteo checked his phone. “Almost two. Why?”

“I don’t think this is a conversation for this time of the morning.”

“Agreed.”

“Okay, boyfriend, where am I sleeping? How long are we going to keep this up?”

“A month at least.”

“Hmm...sounds reasonable. I don’t mind staying in Manhattan.” I hated lying to Luca, but now that I’d seen Santino, I wanted him to lose interest in me as a prospective bride. That was one thing Matteo had going in his favor.

“Let’s talk later.” He reached for me and reeled me back into his arms. “You may have to live with me indefinitely depending on the Santino threat.”

“I’m sure after Luca—”

He bopped my nose lightly. “Tomorrow, baby.”

My brows drew together. “Don’t call me baby.”

He answered with a light kiss on my forehead before taking my hand and leading me to one of the rooms.

CHAPTER

Nine

MATTEO

Having Sera Moretti as a fake girlfriend promised to be pure torture. It was a mistake to kiss her, but there was no choice. We needed to make this fake relationship look real.

The moment I tasted her pouty lips, something flared inside me. The urge to push her down on the couch, get between those legs, and taste her was overwhelming. My hand itched to push her panties to the side and bury my face between her legs, using the fabric to heighten the friction.

She was carnality incarnate.

“You can use this room.” I led her to a bedroom next to mine. Walking to the closet, I flung it open and reached for the bedsheets. I was trying to avoid looking at her, all too aware of the bed next to us when I was fighting against the images of me fucking her into the mattress.

Jesus. What the hell happened back there?

“I can manage this.” Sera grabbed the sheets from me. Our fingers touched and separated like we’d been electrocuted.

“There’s an extra toothbrush—”

“Matteo,” she whispered.

I finally looked at her.

“Can I borrow a shirt?”

“Trevor is picking up some things for us,” I said. “He’ll be here soon.”

“Thanks...shoo.” She smiled, pushing me out the door and slamming it shut behind me.

I stood there like an idiot for five minutes. Or it felt like five minutes.

One kiss.

One fucking kiss had scrambled my brain.

I couldn’t even bear to hold her hand again. Doing that would only lead to consequences I wasn’t ready for.

I stalked back to the living room.

My phone had been going off like crazy, so I switched it to silent. Fortunately, my parents, my nosy sister, and my equally nosy aunt were out of the country. Was it weird that Carlotta was both Sera’s aunt and mine?

I checked my missed calls and numerous text messages.

I shot off one to Dom. He was Aunt Carlotta’s son and the current boss of the De Lucci crime family. That made him Sera’s cousin and also mine. I grew lightheaded for a second as I mentally traversed our family tree to make sure Sera and I weren’t blood related. I was sure I already did this, but seeing how this fake dating was getting more physical, I couldn’t help but make certain again.

Dom deserved to know that Luca and I had spoken. As I was deciding who else needed to be informed of the current situation, my phone went off again.

Daniel.

I smiled grimly. Yes, he needed to know.

“She agreed,” I said without much introduction. Ripping off the Band-Aid. My irritation with him was at an all-time high. I was surprised how my allegiances had shifted. I stayed away from Sera so he could make his move, and he decided he wasn’t ready again? Well, fuck that. All bets are off.

“Agreed to what?” he demanded. “What did you do, De Lucci?”

“What I needed to do to keep her safe.”

“I could have someone pick her up. She should have ridden with us in the first place,” Daniel said. “My sister is freaking out because—”

“Because of Luca? Problem solved. Luca and I have an understanding.”

“Understanding of what?” he shouted.

“Sera agreed to be my girlfriend.”

“What the fuck? Gustavo is going to shit a brick. He’s going to nullify the contract.”

“Staying away from Sera isn’t in it.”

“You’re going to renege on your word?”

“The shares he offered didn’t give us the control we needed. We jumped on it too soon.”

“It was better than nothing.”

“Yes, but I’m willing to take a chance and see where my pursuit of Sera goes.”

“Damn you, De Lucci.” Daniel ended the call and an incoming video call immediately followed. I walked into the study and closed the door.

When Daniel’s face came on the screen, a vein bulged at his temple and his face was red and pissed off. I’d rarely seen him this way. “I need to see with my own eyes that you’re not fucking with me. You’re really serious, aren’t you?”

“Gustavo is protective of Sera. You know as much as I do the remaining fifteen percent he refuses to sell to us could go to her. That’s why Santino is dead set on marrying her. That’s the only way he’d be even with us for control. I’m trying to avoid conflict with the rest of the board and the Galluzo mafia.”

“And Sera knows this is fake, right?”

“Of course,” I scoffed. “But we still have to act like it’s real.”

“What do you mean?”

It gave me sadistic pleasure in telling him, “We still have to kiss and make out for people to see.”

Daniel’s face twisted into a sneer. “You touched her.”

The condemnation in his gaze pissed me off. “You don’t get to act concerned when it was your fucking idea in the first place. I backed off, remember? Because you liked Sera. But then you chickened out again when she started feeling receptive. It sickens me how you play with her emotions.”

“Since when did Sera’s feelings matter to you? You barely know her. Your loyalty is to your family and yet you know going too far with this fake relationship could cause problems with the De Luccis.”

“They’ll come to their senses. With as little time as I’ve spent with Sera, I’m beginning to like her more than you.”

“We’ve been friends for a long time, De Lucci. You’re going to throw away our friendship for her?”

“Are you saying she’s not worth it?”

“Damn you! She was mine first,” Daniel gritted.

An emotion punched me in the gut. I didn’t like him saying she belonged to him.

“You can’t make that claim, because I’ve already claimed her in front of Luca.” The satisfaction of saying this to Daniel invigorated the blood pulsing in my veins. “If you dare show an interest in her while she’s my girlfriend, I’ll consider that a disrespect.”

“This is so fucked up.” Daniel raked his fingers through his hair. “That was not our agreement. You were supposed to leave Sera alone after Gustavo gave in.”

“We both made mistakes.” Mine was putting my hands on Sera and kissing her. Being detached about the whole fake-dating thing was going to be a challenge.

One kiss.

One fucking kiss.

I should run the other way. Drop her off at Daniel's place and let the coward have her.

But Sera deserved more. If she wanted Daniel, my friend had to work for it.

"While Sera and I are in this, in public, it's going to look real. Even in front of Ivy, it's going to look real, so you better rein in your interest in her." I smiled derisively. "You don't have a problem doing that anyway."

"Fuck you, De Lucci." The screen went black.

I was about to turn off my phone when Trevor informed me he dropped off a bag of clothes in front of the door.

And a wry smile twisted my lips. Girlfriend.

That was a first.



Sera

I woke up disoriented. Strange ceiling. Strange windows. Strange bed.

A woody, spicy scent assailed my nostrils. One I wanted to bury my nose into. I pulled the neckline to my face to inhale it more.

The T-shirt was unfamiliar, but the owner wasn't.

Matteo De Lucci's Harvard tee.

After our kiss on the couch last night, we became guarded around each other. It was as though he was forcing himself to be around me. He was affected by the kiss in some way, but still insisted we go through with our fake relationship.

I recalled the way he cursed and turned away from me last night.

Oh boy.

This was going to get interesting.

I wracked my brain about whether we discussed boundaries last night. No, we hadn't, and if we did, not enough.

Last night, I'd admit to being a bit hurt when he knocked on my door to give me the things Trevor brought over.

All he said was "here" and shoved the bag at me before walking away.

I wasn't a needy fake girlfriend, but couldn't he have at least asked if I had everything I needed?

Granted that the bathroom was fully stocked with five-star-hotel amenities, but still. It was my first night here. The baffling part was the inclusion of his own T-shirt when there was a set of pajamas in my size. And just to remain contrary with how I felt about him, I chose his tee to sleep in instead.

I inhaled it again.

"Goddammit, Matteo." A muttered expletive startled me.

Someone was here?

The voices filtered into hushed silence.

That was the sound that woke me up.

Sliding off the bed, I went to the bathroom to splash my face with water, run a comb through my hair, and gurgle mouthwash. After performing the standard morning rituals, I removed a white terry robe that was still in laundromat plastic and put it on. It hung comedically almost to my ankles. Did giants only live here?

I was used to walking barefoot and ignored the archless terry slippers. The second I opened the door, I definitely heard murmuring.

Either they were trying to keep me in the dark about what they were discussing or they were trying to be polite and let me sleep. I followed the voices to a shut door.

“This is going to dig up old shit,” the man said.

“It’s been over thirty years, Paulie. Maybe it’s fucking time people stop avoiding it.”

Zio Paulie was here? I hadn’t seen him since Nonno’s funeral three years ago. Carlotta avoided Chicago because of my grandfather’s third wife who had since moved to L.A. early this year.

I wasn’t sure if I should show myself. Maybe I could hide in my room until Matteo came to get me.

I backed away slowly and then turned around to hurry back to my room. My mind raced and wondered if I could use a phone in the coffee shop below and call Ivy.

The study door opened. “Sera, get in here.”

My spine figuratively snapped into place. I pivoted and glared at Matteo trying to avoid our uncle’s scrutiny. *Our uncle*. Legitimately our uncle and yet Matteo and I were unrelated.

Whew.

“I think caffè will be needed for this discussion,” Paulie said, coming up to me, a big grin on his face. “Sera, it’s been a while.” He gave me a hug. “You’ve grown into a lovely young woman.”

“Except the height,” I laughed.

“Do you want a cappuccino?” Matteo asked me.

“Sure.”

When the three of us reached the kitchen, Paulie and I took our seats behind the counter while Matteo went to work as barista. “Want one, Paulie?”

“Espresso.”

I couldn't help noticing Matteo's broad back and how the muscles rippled underneath his gray shirt.

Damn, Matteo was blessed with good genes. His mother was a redhead and those translucent blue eyes came from her. I always thought Paulie was handsome until I caught a glimpse of Matteo's father Cesar. He was *the* De Lucci who epitomized the De Lucci's famous chiseled jaw that he obviously passed on to his sons.

Paulie had it as well, but he was a lankier version of Matteo's dad. Still, he was an attractive man and I could see why Carlotta fell for him.

No wonder my godfather hated his guts. Zio Gus never got over losing Carlotta to Paulie.

Matteo turned around and set a cappuccino in front of me. "Sorry, I don't do that fancy leaf crap."

"You know if we're going to—" I nearly said fake-date, crap. He narrowed his eyes knowing exactly what I was about to say. What did he expect? I hadn't had twenty-four hours to get used to the situation. "You know I love that leaf design, *caro*," I said sweetly. "Do better next time, okay?"

"You should ask Renz to teach you," Paulie told Matteo. "He's an expert in that."

"He's an expert in that because that's what Liz likes."

I cocked my head. I remember Carlotta telling Luca with glee that the youngest of Cesar's boys got a girl pregnant in high school. There would always be rivalry between the wives. "Liz is..."

"Renz's wife."

"The only victim of the De Lucci curse," Paulie added.

"Curse?"

"Obsession," Paulie said. "They fall in love once and obsess over a woman."

I stared at Matteo with amusement. "Are you in danger of it?"

Matteo made a pfft sound. “It’s a myth. Renz took it too seriously. Look at Paulie,” he said. “I remember him saying he fell in love one too many times.”

“Don’t repeat that to your aunt,” Paulie chuckled. “Where’s my espresso, nephew?”

“So you’re in no danger of falling in obsession over me?” I tongue-in-cheeked.

Matteo rolled his eyes before turning away from us to make the espresso. “Don’t worry. I’m immune to the curse, but I’m not immune to criticism of my cappuccino-making skills.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes, but I tasted his brewed concoction. “Not bad, De Lucci.” I leaned sideways in my seat and regarded Paulie. “So who put you up to checking on us?”

“Carlotta, of course. She’s worried about you since this thing with Matteo came out of nowhere.”

Matteo glanced over his shoulder. “Wow, that’s self-confidence in the reputation of your nephew.”

“You’re playing with fire, pup,” Paulie said. “You know Carlotta will raise a stink about this.”

“I don’t answer to her.”

“She said you’ve both been ignoring her calls.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say it was because Matteo destroyed my phone.

“Here,” Paulie slid his phone toward me. “Why don’t you call her right now?”

I couldn’t even say it was too early because Italy was six hours ahead.

“Fine.” Matteo scowled. “Anything to get her off our backs.”

“Hey—” Paulie said sternly. “You may be the head of De Lucci Transnational now, but you’re still our nephew.”

My fake boyfriend didn’t say anything. I pressed my lips together, not sure whether to laugh. Paulie, I heard, was the

lighthearted De Lucci, but Luca thought it was a front and underneath all that nonchalance was a shrewd businessman.

Carlotta answered on the second ring. “Paulie? Did you get hold of my errant nephew and niece?”

“It’s me, Zia. You’re on speaker,” I said.

“Finally,” she said. “I’ve annoyed Luca enough by blowing up his phone. He told me he talked to you. What am I, chopped liver?”

“I lost my phone in the mayhem yesterday.”

She huffed. “I had a word with Gustavo. I told him to do something about Santino.”

“Lottie,” Paulie cut in. “I told you Cesar is handling it.”

“I know, I pestered him too. I’m with them on this vacation, remember?”

“Calm down, *tesoro*. Your blood pressure, remember?”

“Yes. But he’s gone too far.”

“Let them handle it.”

Another huff came over the phone. “I wasn’t even aware that something like this was going on. What was Luca thinking?”

“After the stunt Santino pulled last night, you can be sure any arranged marriage between us is off the table,” I said.

I shuddered at the close call. Although I wasn’t blindly going into an arranged marriage. I was going to get to know Santino first, but after last night, I was permanently turned off. Instead of becoming a partner, I would be relegated to keeping house for him. Luca knew that wasn’t my plan. I wanted a family, but I wanted to also change the old ways. I wanted my husband to think of me as a helpmate, someone who could give him counsel in running the legitimate side of the business. Sure, I wanted children and to take care of my household, but why not both? It was the twenty-first century.

“And this thing with you and Matteo?”

“I say this with much love, dear aunt,” the man in question drawled. “It’s none of your business.”

This time, Paulie shook his head and covered his mouth, but he couldn’t hide his grin.

“We’re exploring where this is going,” I added.

“Fine. I’ll try not to be nosy.”

“Go take your rest, Lottie. See? The kids are fine.”

After several attempts to say good-bye, we finally ended the call.

I looked at Matteo. “The first thing we need to do today is get me a new phone.”

He shrugged.

Paulie grinned at his nephew. “I’m not sure why Lottie was worried about you railroading Sera. She’s handling you just fine.”

“Don’t encourage her,” Matteo grumbled.

CHAPTER

Ten

MATTEO

“Here.” I handed Sera the phone Jonas delivered. She accepted it tentatively.

We were on our way to the Brooklyn brownstone to pick up the things she needed to stay with me indefinitely.

“I don’t need one this fancy,” she said. “Just one to use until I get a new one from Luca.”

It didn’t take much to figure out that the phone I destroyed was installed with Chicago-crime-family-level security. In Italy, it wasn’t unheard of that criminal organizations had their own phone network.

“Just use it for now. I have it programmed with Carlotta’s and Luca’s numbers.”

Her brows furrowed as she scrolled through the contacts. “Did you just put your entire family tree in here? I don’t know half these people.”

The sass. I only put Paulie, Nico, Renz, and my sister, Bianca, in addition to Trevor and the Wus.

The phone on the dashboard flashed “Dad.”

“Shit.” He called this morning but Sera had been around me. I couldn’t put this off. “Yeah.”

“You’ve been avoiding my calls, Matteo?” my dad asked. Sera gave me a funny look. Yep, I know. It was like I was

talking to myself. Dad and I possessed the same baritone, probably a voice analysis software was the only one that could tell the subtle difference. “Sera is with me,” I said. “Can I call you back?”

“Hi, Mr. De Lucci,” Sera greeted my father.

I bit back a smile. Dad didn’t respond immediately.

Finally, he said, “I’m glad your mother and Bianca are elsewhere, otherwise they’d be hounding your new girlfriend, probably congratulate you too.”

“Congratulate me? For what? It’s not like I’m getting married or engaged.”

“Not the thing to say in front of your girlfriend.”

Sera burst out laughing. “We’re still new. He needs some training.”

“Whoa.” I shot her a look. “Is that the way it’s going to be, baby?”

“She’ll fit right in. Listen. Call me as soon as you can, *capisce?*”

“I’ll call you back in a few. Just taking Sera to her house.”

“The one in Brooklyn?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a good property. Carlotta mentioned it. She said when she gets back you’re going to put it on the market.”

“That’s the plan,” Sera said.

“Talk to Matteo,” Dad said. “He can give you pointers.”

“Thank you.”

“Later, Dad.”

Sera’s house was typical of the row houses in the area. It was a Saturday before noon, and I found parking easily on the street close to her house.

She rummaged through her purse and fished out her keys.

I held out my hand.

She raised a brow. “You think someone is waiting for us inside?”

“No, Trevor and my men already cased the area.”

“Your men?”

“The family.” I grinned. “It pays to be related to the boss.”

I opened the door and went in first. I let Sera turn off the alarm and went straight down to the hallway past the kitchen to check the back door. It was secure.

I turned around and spotted the empty boxes on the floor of what could only be contraband. I checked the markings. “Caviar and vodka.”

I raised a brow in Sera’s direction.

“You didn’t see anything,” she said. “It’s not drugs.”

“I never said they were.” In that regard, the De Luccis and Morettis were aligned.

She said, “I could just return to Chicago.”

“And do what? Hide in your mansion?”

“How is it different from hiding with you?”

I gestured to the space around us. “You could get advice about the real estate market in Manhattan.”

Her mouth twitched. “From you?”

Putting a hand over my chest as though I was wounded, I moved closer. She didn’t back away, but had to tilt her chin up to look at me. I let my salacious thoughts cut loose to the skirt she was wearing last night. It was very hard to concentrate when my mind went beneath that damned baggy shirt she was currently wearing. Trevor was shit at guessing a woman’s size.

“I’m offended,” I said. “The De Lucci name is synonymous with prime real estate.”

“Resorts, shopping complexes, and office buildings maybe,” she retorted. She probably got tired of staring up at me and stepped away. “But homes like this?”

“If you’re talking about Brooklyn homes, then I’ve learned from the best too.”

She smacked her head. “Of course. I think I remember your Irish family lives in the area.”

“They own a couple of rental properties.”

“Wow. Nice. Okay, I’ll just pack up everything and haul it over to your place.” She gestured toward the boxes. “You already saw those. I have nothing else to hide so make yourself at home.” She laughed lightly. “There’s nothing to see except for a few photographs of my great-grandparents.”

Before I could respond, she walked out of the kitchen and returned to the front of the house where the stairs were located. Her abruptness and change of subject only led me to believe she felt the electricity between us and didn’t know what to do about it. Our encounter on the couch was a repeating reel in my head, and I was cocky enough to think that she couldn’t get that out of her mind too. I wasn’t the only one affected.

I went into the living room. Time to return a few calls. The smell of musk and cleaning products invaded my nose. Furniture protectors covered the couch and armchairs. I couldn’t picture Sera living under these conditions. There was nothing interesting to see. Suddenly I wanted to see her baby pictures. I smiled briefly. She was probably a hellion.

There was a rumor that Sera was the one who changed her grandfather’s view on drugs. Chicago used to make a lot of money on that product, but that had changed in the past six years. They had diversified their business into luxury goods and shipping, but the biggest chunk of their revenues came from online gambling and real estate.

I slipped out my phone to call Dad.

“That was quick,” he said.

“Sera is packing.”

“You’re keeping her in Hell’s Kitchen?”

“Yeah.”

“Good idea.”

The tone in my father’s voice made me freeze. “You have information for me?”

“Yes. Gustavo is back in Italy. From my sources, he’s going head-to-head with the Galluzo leadership, no less than his half brother Vincenzo. Those two rarely speak to each other face to face. There’s a sitdown with the clan bosses. He’s threatening to break away from them and take his shares and the influence of the Conte Enterprise board if Santino doesn’t stop hounding Sera.”

“He’s willing to go to war with his family?”

“Gustavo has no choice. Even if he’s fond of Sera, this is more about undermining his authority. He worked so hard to get to the top. Santino may be his nephew, but Gustavo would always remain the bastard son in their eyes. If he gives in now, he’ll lose the power and respect. And money without power is ___”

“Nothing,” I finished. “But is it all because Santino showed up here?”

“Does it surprise you?”

“Guess not.” They were mafia after all. It was built on grudges and vendettas. And judging by my interactions with him, Gustavo was old school.

“What Santino did was a ballsy but stupid move.”

Dad chuckled. “Yeah. His kind of mob intimidation might work in Italy, but it’s different with the American mafia. Also, Santino doesn’t take rejection well.”

“Moretti shouldn’t have promised his niece.”

“I don’t think he did. Dangled was more my understanding. Santino is one of the highest earners of their organization and it has gotten to his head. He thinks of himself

as the heir apparent of the Galluzo given that Vincenzo has no sons.”

And this was why the situation was dicey.

“Yeah. The man’s got leverage with Don Vincenzo. They’d been looking forward to the olive oil windfall, especially with the Wu partnership, but Gustavo seemed to have a change of heart. This put the don in a difficult situation.”

There was a brief pause as my dad talked to someone. When he came back on the line, he said, “Ava and Bianca are on their way back to the yacht.”

I wasn’t prepared for questions from them. “I better get back to Sera. Keep me updated. Give my love to Mom and Bianca.”

“Take care, son.”

After ending the call, I went in search of my fake girlfriend. I found her hauling a suitcase out of the room. I swooped in and took it from her. She gave it up with no objection.

Somehow this put me at ease. I was all for feminism, but Dad always instilled in me the importance of treating women with respect and the finer points of chivalry: Open doors. Offer to carry the heavy stuff. Always pay for dinner.

“We should go on a date tonight,” I told her.

She leaned away as if to look at me better. “A real date?”

“Yeah. In a restaurant. In public.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Where? Formal? Casual?”

I remembered the story of my parents’ first date. “Not pizza.”

Sera laughed. “I sure hope so.”

“You don’t like pizza?”

“My family reveres pizza. We’re kind of snobs.”

“Duly noted.” We had to go single file down the narrow steps. At the bottom of the stairs, I said, “My parents’ first date

was at a pizzeria.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, my mom really wanted pizza. Dad had a fancy dinner booked at Le Bernardin.”

“She turned down a Michelin-starred restaurant for pizza?”

“Diavolo is the best in town.”

“You’ll have to take me sometime.” Sera was still grinning. Daylight streamed from the sidelights of the door and the Palladian window above it, bathing her in natural light. Had her eyes always been this luminous? They were multifaceted hazel brown, caramel striated with black. Her rosy lips were generous. Her nose was thin and snubbed at the tip. Cute, sexy, angelic.

Her brows furrowed. “Are you okay?”

“The kid was right.”

“What kid?”

“The one at the charity,” I explained. “He said you looked like an angel. You do.”

“Matteo De Lucci, are you getting mesmerized by my Moretti charm?” A slow smile curved her lips, and a mischievous gleam entered her eyes. “Or did you hit your head somewhere?”

“Now you’ve gone and ruined the moment,” I sighed. “When you say Moretti, I have a picture of Luca and a cigar dangling from his mouth. So…” I checked my phone. More messages. “Dinner tonight? What are you in the mood for?”

“Surprise me, but no Italian or American.”

“I can do that. I need to go to the office for a bit.”

“It’s Saturday. Are you and Daniel in a race for workaholic of the year?”

A pang of a strange emotion rattled in my chest. “How do you know Daniel works on Saturdays?”

“Please, I know his schedule like the back of my hand.” She gave me an odd look. “What? Ivy is my best friend.”

I yanked open the front door and had her rearm the alarm.

“You’re not going to lock me up while you go to work, right?”

With things brewing in Italy, I didn’t think Santino was stupid enough to abduct Sera. Luca was going to rain down lead on his head if that happened, and although Santino had the backing of the Harlem gang and the Rossi crime family, messing with Chicago was going to take a lot of balls if not sheer insanity. Unless the Galluzo threw its unified support behind Santino, then the shift of allegiances would be catastrophic. But we weren’t there yet. Still, I wasn’t taking any chances. “I’ll take you back to The Grindhouse apartment, but Trevor can escort you to wherever you want. Outside Manhattan is off-limits though.”

Sera groaned. “I just got clear of Tony and Rocco.”

“As soon as the Galluzo reins in Santino for certain, you’ll get your freedom back.”

CHAPTER

Eleven

SERA

“I probably shouldn’t have asked him to surprise me,” I told Ivy. While Matteo went to the office, my friend and I decided to meet at the Wus’ luxury boutique in the Meatpacking District. Donateka was their new shop that just opened this year. It was a cross between classy and hip, form and function.

I stared at the clothes Ivy laid out in front of me.

“Definitely black.” Ivy looked at me critically. “You want to dress like a New Yorker with basic stuff by not trying too hard. You’ve got boobs. Our functional bustier just came in.”

“I’m not going for sex kitten,” I reminded her dryly.

Ivy laughed. “No, dummy. A sheer topper edged with flirty ruffles will finish the look.”

Ooh, I liked where this idea was going. “Edgy yet romantic.”

“Exactly.”

She led me to the dressing rooms.

Forty-five minutes later, we put together a perfect ensemble for the evening that would be at home in a pub or dinner at a three-star Michelin restaurant.

Completing the bustier and blouse were stretchy editor-cut trousers and black ankle boots. I had a bedazzled black clutch I thankfully packed in the suitcase back at Matteo’s loft.

We were in the lounge room in front of the dressing room when one of the sales assistants came in.

“Your brother is here,” she told Ivy.

“What?”

“He has something important to tell you.”

Daniel was here? My heart did a somersault which bothered me. I needed to bury my crush for my best friend’s brother out of respect for my agreement with Matteo.

He was standing by the accessory section, casually flicking the scarves that were on display.

“What are you doing here?” my friend asked.

Ivy and Daniel were not affectionate with each other. Unlike Italians, they didn’t hug or kiss. Ivy was more liberal with her American friends, but one thing that made a good entrepreneur when doing international commerce was to study the culture of your business partners.

“Daniel,” I breathed.

“Hi, Sera. Doing a bit of shopping?”

“A whole wardrobe.”

“She has a date with Matteo.”

A frown creased his forehead. “A date.”

“Yes,” I said as I studied his face for a reaction. “Our first official one.”

The frown disappeared to be replaced by a secretive smile that touched the corners of his mouth. It was a puzzling reaction that annoyed me. Was he jealous or not? Was he going to stop me from dating Matteo or not?

“So, what are you doing here?” Ivy repeated. Something must not have been going right between them because my best friend seemed unusually clipped. I hoped I wasn’t the reason. It couldn’t be Matteo because Ivy appeared eager to help me with my date. If this was Daniel blowing hot and cold on me

again, I was fraying at the edge of my patience. He was on the verge of becoming a disappointment.

Besides, I didn't want their relationship to take a hit because of me and I certainly could look after myself.

"I want to personally tell you that K-Cee Yee is not renewing our contract for Donateka. Even for our Asian stores."

"What?" Ivy asked. "Why?"

"It's not representative of the demographic she appeals to," Daniel said. "She said something about the optics of her wearing our clothes, clashing with her colorful songs and the message of her latest album."

"She needs some class if you ask me," Ivy retorted. "She's what? Twenty-eight, and she thinks she's still seventeen?"

"She's been a long-lasting pop sensation," her brother said.

"We don't need her," Ivy said. "We should change the direction of our advertising and leverage more of our customer base."

I was offended for my friends. They'd worked so hard to build their brand. Sure, they were pricey, but their customers were assured of the quality of their clothes down to the sourcing of raw material. All fair trade. No child labor or sweatshops. They had workrooms in Hong Kong, Singapore, Milan, and they just opened one in Brooklyn to service their North American market.

"Look, I'm wearing your stuff tonight. If I freaking know where Matteo is taking me, you can sic the tabloid that's so fond of making news of the De Luccis on us."

But maybe I should ask Matteo first.

Both brother and sister eyed me critically. I knew they weren't looking at me as their friend but as a marketing tool.

If Ivy could pull off the front page on the Holy Tattler, it was a win-win. Matteo could thank me later. The news of our fake dating would spread like wildfire not only on Wall Street,

but I could also promote my friend's store. A big fuck-you to the pop princess. How dare she snub my friends?

"That's not a bad idea." Daniel leaned against the counter and drummed his fingers on the shelf.

"I can make that happen," Ivy said. "I shot off a text to my assistant to find that reporter who loves following the New York Five Families. And then when they ask you what you're wearing?"

"Irina by Donateka." With a coy expression, I fluttered my lashes.

Ivy and I burst out laughing.

Daniel tipped his chin toward the clothes draped on our arms. "Which one did you pick?"

He touched the fabric of the pants. "Is this our new stretchy blend?"

Ivy rolled her eyes and told him the proper brand name which had a patent pending.

"Anything you need..." Daniel looked around. "Shoes, accessories..."

A weight of responsibility descended on my shoulders. This simply shopping for a date with Matteo had morphed into something else.

"Charge it to your expense account," Daniel told his sister.

"I'm paying for this," I protested, my eyes frantic on my friend. "We had a pact." I patronized their shop as long as I was paying like any other customer. No special treatment.

"We let our models keep their clothes," Ivy said. "And I've been wanting to dress you up in forever without you balking at the cost."

"Now, you all have me second-guessing."

"Too late." Ivy tucked her arm in my elbow and led me to the shoe section. "I love your ankle boots, but I have a better option. And let's not forget the purse."



Matteo

“Good afternoon, Mr. De Lucci.”

I nodded to the guard and strode past the reception area of Daniel’s building. The building had advanced security. An app for the elevator was used exclusively by the top floors.

Daniel had given me access.

I got into the elevator and watched the floor numbers zoom up with growing impatience.

I’d been in a bad mood ever since Trevor told me that the siblings had dragged Sera back to their penthouse. This wasn’t how I envisioned our date at all. Granted I had given her leeway to move around the city as long as she had Trevor with her, I expected her back at the apartment where I would be picking her up for our date.

She wasn’t answering her phone either.

When the doors slid open, I beat back a growl at the scene that greeted me.

Daniel was in the act of putting a necklace around Sera’s neck.

And what the hell was she wearing? Underwear?

Her shoulders and chest were exposed and the fucker was staring right into her cleavage, which seemed more abundant given how it was shaped presumably by the tightness of her top.

My eyes scanned the area, my gaze momentarily locking with Trevor’s before noticing what Ivy was doing. She was pointing her phone in their direction and I suspected it was for social media.

“You’re too stiff, Daniel,” Ivy protested before finally noticing I’d arrived. “Oh, hi, Matteo.”

“What’s going on here?” I growled.

Daniel’s self-satisfied smile made me want to break his nose. I’d deal with him later.

Sera’s eyes widened upon seeing me. The awkward smile she plastered on her face conveyed she’d known I wouldn’t be pleased with this scene.

I’d deal with her later too.

I had no claim to Sera in the real sense. Daniel was aware of this. This grated on me. I didn’t want him anywhere around her, especially knowing how Sera felt about him. The fact that it would make me look like the chump to the public was not even the problem here. I didn’t know when my feelings started to change. Probably when I was feeling more sympathetic to Sera than Daniel.

She was honest. Growing up a Moretti, she had a good but sometimes misguided heart. It was common with people who grew up half in and half out of the family. I could relate.

But most of all she intrigued me.

“Can I have my girlfriend back?” I bared my teeth.

Daniel’s smirk faltered at the seriousness of my tone. Good. The sooner he quit fucking with me, the better. He’d gone pussy over her. He didn’t get to jab me from the cheap seats.

“The clasp of the necklace was too slippery,” Sera explained.

I held out my hand to Daniel. He reluctantly surrendered the piece of jewelry.

“That needs a redesign, Ivy,” he told his sister.

“The design is fine. You’re just all thumbs when it comes to these things.”

“Turn around,” I told Sera. “Lift your hair.”

Vanilla and coconut wafted under my nose, and my olfactory senses couldn’t help but follow the source of the scent. It was addictive.

I leaned in closer, the warmth of our bodies mingling.

“What are you doing?” She cocked her head to the side.

Our mouths were almost touching. “Putting a necklace around my girlfriend.”

I easily mated the links, but I wasn’t done. All the exposed skin before me was too smooth, too tempting, too...ah fuck it. I kissed the top of her shoulder. An audible gasp escaped her lips.

“Oh my God,” Ivy shrieked. “That was perfect! You are so worthy of main character billing, Sera!”

I turned her toward me. “Do you have a top to put over that?”

“Of course.” A frown marred her face. “Why? Is it too revealing?”

Yes, my mind growled. “No.” Since when have I been that possessive asshole. Baffled at how I reacted, I scrambled for an excuse. “It’s cold outside.”

“The cover-up is still sheer.” Sera chewed on her lower lip. “We’re not walking to the place, right? I’m from Chicago. I can tolerate cold weather.”

“Here’s the blouse.” Ivy handed me a black see-through top. I helped Sera into it and buttoned the three hooks that held the ruffled flaps together, leaving a deep v-neckline.

She was sexy as fuck.

“Trevor will drop us off at the restaurant.”

“Where are we going?”

I grinned. “You’ll see.”

Ivy’s eyes were glued to the phone. “Holy crap, people, that’s six thousand views in five minutes. Plus, six hundred likes. People are going gaga over that shoulder kiss and that smoldering look.” She glanced up. “I think you two should open a joint social media account.”

“Hell no,” I muttered.

Sera laughed.

CHAPTER

Twelve

SERA

Matteo was devastatingly handsome in a fitted suit. He didn't wear any tie. Casual elegance from work to play. Since our kiss on the couch last night, I'd become aware of every inch of this man. I had to prevent myself from shuddering like a virgin when he planted that kiss on my shoulder.

It was so erotic.

Intimate.

Apparently social media thought so too.

"They're asking what you're wearing." Ivy excitedly typed in the response. "Take that, pop princess."

"Sis, let that go," Daniel chided. He smiled at me. "Thanks for doing this." He tapped me lightly on the shoulder and shot me his endearing half smile. The one where it was mysterious. Or it used to be. It also used to send me into a tizzy. But at that moment, I was more aware of the Italian Irishman beside me more than Daniel.

"They're really shipping the two of you," my friend continued chattering. "Matsera."

"Seriously." I shook my head and looked at my fake boyfriend, and frowned. He and Daniel were in a stare off. What the hell?

I tugged his hand. “Let’s go, I hope you have an early reservation.”

“I had it for seven. That okay?” Finally, he gave me his eyes. They transformed from blue ice to blazing sapphire. My lady bits quivered.

“Where are you guys going?” Daniel asked.

Matteo was already guiding me toward the elevators. “I’m not telling Sera, why should I tell you?”

A Bentley was waiting for us at the front of the building. As Trevor switched places with the driver who gave Matteo a salute, my date helped me into the back of the vehicle. The privacy screen was up. When he got in beside me, the roomy interior became smaller.

Matteo didn’t say anything for long seconds. Even when the Bentley started moving, he remained silent. He checked his phone and then tapped on the side of the car.

I fidgeted with my bracelet. It was the only piece of jewelry on my body that I owned.

“I’m sorry if I messed up your plans for tonight,” I ventured. Earlier at the penthouse, his eyes flared with heat but he didn’t comment on my appearance the way a man should on a first date. I knew I looked good, but maybe he liked his dates to be more demure. I didn’t think to do any research on his love life or dating life. I was tempted to reach for my phone, but I stilled myself.

It was too late anyway.

He glanced at me briefly. “It’s fine.”

“See, I don’t think it is,” I fired back. “If we’re going to do *this*.” I cocked my head toward the divider.

“Trevor knows the deal,” he told me. This time he shifted in his seat so he was facing me. Unlike the night he took me home, it was harder to discern his expression in the dimly lit interior.

“You need to tell me what’s bugging you.”

He exhaled a long breath. “Fine. What’s the deal with the social media video?”

“You don’t have a problem with that, do you?”

“I don’t. I want as much publicity to reach Gustavo and Santino as possible.”

“So…”

“The clothes you’re wearing…”

“Oh…”

“Yes… oh. They’re from Daniel.”

“Donateka. From Ivy. What’s the big deal?”

“Trevor told me that Daniel offered it up.”

Shit, he got me there. I forgot Trevor was loitering in the shop. “Is this some kind of alpha male posturing?”

He leaned closer. “Look at it this way. It’s our first date and you’re wearing clothes bought for you by another man.” His fingers touched the necklace. “You’re wearing jewelry from a man who has shown interest in you.”

“You mean a man who doesn’t know whether or not he wants me? Well, it’s his loss. He paid for my clothes to go out with you. I’d say you’re the winner here.”

Matteo shook his head and laughed derisively. “I don’t know what kind of role model Luca is.”

“Keep him out of this.”

He edged closer. “You, Sera, don’t know men.”

“If you mean men like you, probably,” I retorted.

His mouth quirked up. “Do you have an answer for everything?”

I had to think about that.

“Just me?” he prodded.

I laughed. “Don’t feel so special. Come to think of it, I’m only this way around insufferable men.”

“Besides me, who?”

“Luca. Or maybe it’s arrogant Italians.”

“I’m part Irish.”

“You’ve got good genetics.”

This time his smirk curved more into a semblance of a satisfied smile. “Are you trying to distract me with flattery so I’ll forget your dating faux pas?”

“You make it sound like I’ve broken some irrefutable dating etiquette. This is a special circumstance.”

Why were we still arguing?

“Debatable.” He stared at my lips.

My heartbeat grew erratic. “And I wasn’t the only one who broke dating etiquette.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” I said. “You didn’t even compliment me on how I looked.” I knew that was being petty, but I wasn’t about to start off with low expectations coming from him. Even if it was a fake date.

His voice lowered. “You know you’re gorgeous.”

“Oh my God, have you ever dated at all?”

He looked away and scratched his brow with a finger, that deep chuckle that never quite escaped his mouth vibrated in his chest. “I fucked up, didn’t I?” He looked at me. “You’re not the only one who’s having trouble navigating this fake relationship. I do know how to pay a compliment, and I’m sorry for being an ass.” He tapped my nose lightly. “You, Sera Moretti, take my breath away.”

My cheeks flushed. “You don’t have to exaggerate.”

“To be honest, I didn’t know how to react when I first saw you. There you were, looking so damn beautiful with all this exposed skin and another man had his hands all over you.” His mouth thinned. “You’re not like any woman I’ve ever dated.”

At my doubtful look, he added, “Despite our current situation.”

“We never talked about boundaries,” I said. “There are already hurt feelings...and would you please move over to your side of the car?”

As if to be contrary, he edged closer.

“I don’t like boundaries,” he murmured. “Especially when it comes to you.”

He captured my lips in a searing kiss. Awareness ignited every inch of my skin. My mouth opened and his tongue swept in, hot and demanding. He pulled my leg over his, grinding our bodies together.

He released my lips and traced my jaw with his mouth. “I’ve done nothing but think of ripping these clothes from your body since the moment I saw you in them.”

“That’s not boundaries,” I gasped when he licked the shell of my ear.

“Fuck boundaries,” he said before claiming my lips once more. With our bodies smashed together, his right hand skated my leg and my side. His fingers feathered the outside of my boobs. He pulled away slightly and said, “If I let myself go further”—his thumb brushed the fabric covering my nipple—“we’ll never get to dinner. As much as I wished you were in a skirt, you made the right call wearing pants. Otherwise, you’d be on your back with your feet hitting the roof and my face buried between your thighs.”

My mouth fell open. He grabbed my hand and put it over his erection.

He was rock hard.

“This is what you do to me, Sera.”

I clenched my thighs together. Wet heat pulsed between them.

His forehead sank to mine. “I don’t know if I can make it through dinner.”

“You must,” I said solemnly just as my stomach grumbled.
“Because I’m hungry.”



Matteo

This was insanity. Or was it? I was jealous of the clothes she was wearing. My fingers itched to rip them off her body and that presented another problem. My imagination was wreaking havoc at what Sera Moretti would look like naked. Whatever she was wearing pushed her tits to a voluptuous advantage, and it reminded me of Daniel’s hands on her when he was fastening the necklace.

“Ow, you’re squeezing too tight.”

The red haze lifted as I glanced down at where our hands were joined. Trevor dropped us in front of the hotel where we had our reservations in a restaurant owned by a world-famous chef.

“Sorry.” I loosened my grip.

We walked across the marble flooring in silence. The encounter in the car left me reeling with a hard-on from hell and mulling over fucking feelings I didn’t want to examine. So I elected silence.

I detested feeling jealous when I had no reason to be.

Sera belonged to Daniel.

My mind instantly rejected the thought.

We approached the hostess podium. The maître d’ recognized me. Chez Michele Jean was a favorite destination of the De Luccis. Food played an integral part in our family culture. When there were frequent squabbles on who wanted to eat Italian or Irish food, the safest route was to go to either a French or Japanese restaurant.

The hostess led us to my requested table at the enclosed outdoor seating.

“Oh.” Sera’s gaze scanned the curved windows of the area. “You get a one-eighty view. It’s so pretty,” she continued to gush. The greenery of the indoor garden framed the view of the Manhattan skyline at night.

When we were seated at the table, our server arrived with the bottle of a wine I’d planned for tonight.

Sera eyed the bottle. “It’s my favorite wine.”

I nodded for the sommelier to uncork it.

“How did you find out?” she asked. “Are you stalking me, Matteo De Lucci?”

“I have my ways.”

“Ivy?”

“She gave me a list. I already failed with your cappuccino this morning.” I lifted my glass to hers. “You told me to do better...I hope I did.”

She beamed at me. “Oh, you sure did.”

My chest tightened as I inhaled the image of Sera’s heart-shaped face lit by the lone candle on our table. I cleared my throat. “Should we toast to a successful first date?”

“I’m all for that.”

We clinked our glasses and sipped our wine.

When we lowered our drinks, a brief awkwardness descended between us. Luckily, our server interrupted.

“Are we having the tasting menu tonight?”

Sera stared at the menu. “It’s seven courses.”

“You said you were hungry.”

“This is a lot, but the lobster roll looks good.”

“We’ll do the seven courses,” I told our server. “Leave the drink menu.”

“Very good, sir.”

When our server disappeared, I moved my chair closer. “We might want to get a burger afterward.”

“Oh, I know.” Sera’s voice lowered conspiratorially. “I’m from Chicago, remember?”

“You mean I haven’t impressed you?”

“I don’t impress easily, Matteo De Lucci.” She took another sip of her wine. “But this is good out of the bottle.”

I rimmed the glass with my finger, staring at the burgundy liquid before picking it up and swirling it around.

“You don’t need to do that. This vintage is good as it is.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those wine snobs.”

“Snob. No. But I’m protective of my favorite wine. Do you know the winemaker is a legend in Napa Valley?”

“I’ll buy you a case of it.”

“There’s no such thing as a case of it,” she said smugly. “It’s a twelve-year waiting list.”

True. I raided Dad’s wine cellar. There were only two bottles and he warned me not to touch the other one, one of a better vintage that was over fifteen grand. I was more of a scotch guy. I didn’t have a wine collection. Maybe I should start one. “You’re high maintenance.”

“Hopefully, you won’t suffer me for long.”

“You’re breaking up with me before we finish our first date?”

“Oh, your ego can handle it.”

She was wrong. Talking about ego only reminded me that the clothes and jewelry she was wearing came from Daniel. The only thing I recognized that belonged to her was the simple bracelet around her wrist. It looked old and antique and should look out of place with her whole attire, but somehow she made it work. I had noticed the trinket when we were in the soup kitchen.

I tasted the wine again. It was bold and loud like any California cabernet. “I’m surprised your favorite is not an Italian wine.”

“Luca gives me grief about it all the time. But I was on a research trip in Napa.” She smiled. “I was in my chef phase, that time between high school and college. A friend of Luca was opening a restaurant and he sent me there to learn the business.”

“You seem to be a jill-of-all trades.”

“Clothes and food,” she quipped.

“What are your plans now?”

“I don’t know,” she mumbled, holding the goblet against the candlelight. “It seems awkward to work with Daniel now that you’ve ruined it.”

“Ruined it?”

“Acting all possessive.”

“If I’m not mistaken, Ivy was recording. Don’t you think the optics would look questionable if he’s the one fixing that necklace around your neck?”

The server took that moment to serve us the first course and Sera looked relieved that she didn’t have to answer.

“Oysters and Osetra caviar with crème fraiche.”

After the server left, we stared at our plate and we both tried to keep the grin from our faces.

“Osetra,” Sera whispered. “If this is the same one in the fridge at home, I feel sorry for you.”

I sighed. “I’m never going to impress you, am I?”

“There’s still the lobster.”

“Lobster roll. You’ll probably say you could have it at any of the roving trucks.”

“Aw,” she said in sympathy. She reached across the table and patted my hand. “You get an A for effort.”

I barked a laugh that prompted other patrons to shoot disapproving glares my way. This woman. I couldn't even hide my amusement by sipping my wine because I might choke on it.

I turned my hand palm up and linked our fingers. "You, Sera Moretti, are good for my soul."

Her eyes widened while a blush stole up her cheeks. I wondered if she was blushing all over.

I could have kicked myself for the words that just spilled from my lips. But they were the most honest ones I'd said in a long time.

"Uh." She looked down at the oysters and the gray pearls on the plate. She glanced up and grinned. "You're not falling in love with me, are you?"

A suppressed chuckle vibrated deep in my chest. She had a weird smile on her face and she was looking at me with heated eyes. I gave myself a mental shake, berating myself for transferring my attraction to her. She probably thought we were on the strangest first date. "Maybe you're the one falling in love with me."

"Really? Well, you're the one holding my hand captive," she pointed out. "And I want both hands for eating."

I let it go. "So, you're not one of those who want to be in a couple and hold hands while eating?"

A look of mock horror came over her face. "Nope. I take my food seriously." She used the appetizer fork to lift the delicate oyster to her mouth. All thoughts of what oysters do to the libido started a stirring in my groin. Goddammit, I needed to make it through dinner, but Sera didn't know what other plans I had in store for her tonight. I had every intention of tasting her. I almost groaned audibly when her tongue slipped out to lick the cream smeared on her lips and scrambled for something that would throw ice on my rising erection.

"That's something my sister would say."

“How old is Bianca now?” She gave me her distracted attention.

“Twenty-one.” I tipped my chin to her plate. “Everything all good there?”

“It’s good.” She gave a series of nods that indicated “good” was just to spare my feelings.

“You’re supposed to say it’s delicious,” I teased. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I didn’t say anything was wrong with it.”

“Don’t ever play poker,” I said dryly.

“It’s average Osetra,” she said. “There’s really no bad Osetra.”

“Of course you would know this.”

She grinned. “We should have eaten the two jars in the fridge.”

“So what exactly do you do for the *family*?”

She raised a brow at me and then looked around her. “I’m not going to discuss family outside the family.”

“Fair enough.”

As the server brought in course after course, we talked about less sensitive topics. Mostly her business degree and her competition with Ivy.

“I’m surprised you and Ivy are best friends.”

“And we were roommates,” she added.

“Was it a case of keep your friends close and your enemies closer?”

She grabbed her napkin and laughed into it. I liked her laugh. After a few seconds, she said, “I wouldn’t go that far. No, a year into graduate school we already knew we were kicking ass because we were trying to one-up the other. We decided to turn it into a healthy competition...okay sometimes blood was spilled.”

I arched a brow.

“That’s figurative, silly. Sure, we get into arguments. But to survive grad school and to prevent the other students who wanted to grab the top spot, Ivy and I decided to join forces. We have the same interests, clothes, food—she loves wine and fruity drinks, but she’s a lightweight. We just made time to study and made time for fun.”

I loved the animated way she talked about her studies. How she used Conte Enterprise’s modernization of olive oil production as the basis for her thesis.

“I’m surprised Gustavo modernized his production. He’s very traditional.”

“You don’t know Godfather at all,” she said. “His motto is, know tradition, but keep up with the times.”

Huh, did I misunderstand the old man?

I watched the shifting expressions on her face. Very... passionate. Would she bite down on her bottom lip when I gave her an orgasm, or would her mouth open and moan?

“What about you?”

I cleared my throat and took a sip of wine to pour ice water over the lava racing through my veins. “Harvard.”

“Did all of you go there?”

“Just Nico and me.”

“And Renz?”

“He didn’t go to college,” I clipped.

“Oh.”

“The building that we’re in? He manages it and the café on the first floor belongs to him.”

“Go for your passion.”

I didn’t know how to answer that. My brother’s passion was Liz and my niece, Sam. And Liz always dreamed of opening a coffee shop with a bakery.

“You could say that.”

“Not everyone wants to be a billionaire CEO.”

The server appeared by our side to deliver the fourth course.

Sera's eyes lit up. "Finally."

I was beginning to worry that seven courses weren't enough. The servings were tiny and Sera seemed to eat with gusto, which appealed to me. The cream puff shop next door was a favorite post-restaurant stopover for the De Luccis. Sometimes, Nico and I would hold off until the family was done and go eat at the basement ramen shop near Times Square.

But the whole point of this date...what was the whole point? I wasn't even sure anymore.

Sera gingerly lifted the overpriced lobster roll and took a bite. "Ooooh." She actually shimmied her ass on the chair before she took a bite.

I'd never met anyone outside my family this enthusiastic about food. The women I dated never lasted long. I had no particular type—slender, curvy, flat chested, or big tits. But I'd mostly dated women who were taller than Sera. They just appealed to me more. But Sera had so much to her and that wasn't all physical.

"You're not eating?" she asked, eyeing my plate and then her half-eaten roll.

"I'm waiting to see if that's enough for you."

"Oh my God." She paled. "I'm the worse date ever."

I started chuckling. "Sera...stop it, all right? You're my best date ever."

She preened a little. "Luca did say I'd scare guys away with my appetite."

"I don't know where you put it. You're so tiny."

"Hips and boobs," she quipped before she took another bite.

My eyes heated. "They're perfectly allocated, then."

She put down the roll. “Seriously, Matteo, if you don’t start eating, I’m going to have a complex.”

I replenished our wines. “Why?”

“Because...you’re the man...”

“Believe me, appetites don’t apply to gender. You should see the women in my family. And it has nothing to do with being Italian because the Irish side is the same.”

“Your mother’s side runs a franchise of Irish pubs, right?”

“Yes. Eamonn’s,” I said with pride. “Mom was the brains behind the franchise. Before she met my dad, it was floundering, but she turned it around. And contrary to the rumors saying the De Luccis were responsible for bailing Eamonn’s from bankruptcy, that’s not true. It was because of my mom’s tenacity and business sense.”

“Wow, that’s so inspiring.”

“I think you two would get along.”

She dropped her head and eyed my plate. “You should really eat.”

Sera wasn’t ready for meeting-the-family conversation. I was surprised I brought it up too because I rarely brought girlfriends to a cozy family dinner, mostly clan events like a wedding where a date was required.

“I’ll make you a deal,” I said. “The next course is lamb filet.”

Sera shrugged, shooting me a puzzled look.

“Would you prefer the lamb or the lobster?”

Her eyes danced merrily. “I see where this is going...”

I smiled, knowing exactly where her thoughts went, but I waited for her to say something.

“We’re negotiating,” she said. “You really want the lamb and are hoping to have two servings of it.”

“I honestly don’t care. I was trying to be...chivalrous.”

“I like lobster a little more, but I also like lamb.”

“Are you going to leave me with nothing, woman?”

I couldn't help grinning back at her tinkling laughter.

“Let's stick to the tasting menu,” she said. “Eat your lobster.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

CHAPTER

Thirteen

SERA

The paparazzi disrupted our romantic dinner. Patrons complained about the unwanted attention of curious onlookers staring through the windows of the outdoor seating. The advantage of outdoor seating was to watch New York life pass you by. You did not expect the reverse, to have New York watch you eat and be the fish in the fishbowl.

Matteo was talking on the phone with Trevor on how to manage our exit.

I exchanged texts with Ivy. My video with Matteo had zoomed to a 100k likes and over two million views in three hours. Good thing I finished the fudge brownie à la mode, which was the most down-to-earth dish in this restaurant. I didn't have the heart to tell Matteo that I preferred hole-in-the-wall restaurants. Living in Chicago, and then in Napa, I sampled haute cuisine everywhere. A visit to Hong Kong opened my eyes to unpretentious street food. From Hong Kong's curry fish balls and egg tarts to Singapore's Hainanese chicken, she educated me on Hawker food I loved today.

Still, I enjoyed the dinner.

I loved that Matteo went to the trouble of finding out my favorite wine. I would have considered eating cheese and salami while drinking the wine a successful date.

The lobster roll was delicious, but the best ones I'd had usually came from the roving trucks, not like this one steeped in foamy stuff that, although was tasty, overshadowed the crustacean's naturally sweet, briny goodness.

But I enjoyed Matteo's company the most.

My phone rang.

"Hey, chica—" Ivy gushed. "You're a superstar! I haven't had this many views in a long time."

"I'm glad I helped your platform," I said dryly.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?"

"Matteo was an attentive dinner companion." I angled my eyes at the man who cast me a brief smile before returning to his conversation with Trevor.

"You make him sound as interesting as a hangnail."

I burst out laughing. "I assure you, he is more interesting and not as annoying."

"Where is he taking you next?"

"I'm not sure. He said he wanted to take me to a cream puff place."

"You just had dinner."

"A bar is too cliché, and I don't want to ruin the flavor of the Screeching Raven."

There was a long pause.

"What vintage?"

"Not *the* vintage, although Matteo hinted that a fifteen-grand one was sitting in his father's cellar." Depending when he purchased it, the price of that vintage was probably already double.

"There are only two hundred bottles known to be circulating of that one and no one is willing to admit to owning it." This particular wine attained cult status a decade ago when a three liter bottle went up for auction and

commanded five hundred thousand dollars. No one knew who owned it because the bidder used a middleman.

“Are you saying I should use my charms to finagle our way into when the De Luccis might drink it?” I teased. “Because I’m sure Mr. De Lucci is saving it just for him and his wife.”

Matteo ended his call and looked at me.

“Hey, I need to go,” I told Ivy.

“Make an appearance in front of the hotel.”

“I don’t like this publicity.”

“Don’t play coy,” my friend drawled. “You love it. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be best friends.”

“Hmm...are you forgetting your handsome...” I caught myself, but I gave myself away when I turned a stricken look at Matteo. Yep, I shouldn’t be playing poker because the man’s face turned to stone and the warmth that had been in his eyes earlier iced over.

Way to kill the mood, Sera.

I turned away from him and muttered into the phone, “Shit.”

Ivy groaned. “Shit, all right. A blow job might make up for it.”

I hung up on my friend and pasted a smile on my face before turning back to my date. “I’m ready.”

He nodded briefly, sliding his seat back and walking over to help me from mine.

“So, what’s the plan?” He put his hand at the small of my back to guide me out of the restaurant.

“There’s hardly a plan.”

“No?” The mockery in his tone pulled my gaze up to him. He was staring straight ahead.

“Surely...” He paused, looking down at me. “We don’t want the clothes Daniel gave you to go to waste.”

“They’ve already served their purpose. And stop acting like a jealous boyfriend.”

I nearly stumbled on a stupid area rug in the middle of the hotel atrium, but he steadied me before he clasped my hand.

“Don’t want to face-plant in front of the paps.” His gaze was still focused ahead and his voice remained arctic.

We entered the wide revolving doors.

It wasn’t a siege of reporters or a crowd one would expect from a Hollywood star, and Midtown on a Saturday night was flushed with people waiting to party anyway. A few cameras started flashing while groupies held up their phones to record.

“Matteo De Lucci.” A woman in a smart cream pantsuit broke away from the throng of people. She had the whole social media blogging reporter down pat with her gizmos attached to her belted waist.

“Miss Romero, why am I not surprised to see you?”

“This is an interesting pairing,” she said. “Are New York and Chicago looking for an alliance?”

“I think you’re asking the wrong people.”

The girl looked at me. “Seraphina Moretti, right?”

“I don’t know you, so I’m not confirming, although...” I paused. “It seems you already know, so I’m not sure why you’re asking?”

“Oh, this one has claws, Matteo,” the reporter purred.

“What do you want, Romero?” he snapped.

“Sera, Sera...” voices called from the crowd and that was when I noticed Trevor and a few men doing crowd control and, with the way they moved, they were experienced handling these types of situations.

I ignored Romero and smiled at one of Ivy’s biggest fans, who regularly commented on my friend’s social media account. I recognized her from the profile picture of purple hair and funky glasses.

“You’re camera-shy-beauty, right?” I asked.

“Oh my God, you know me,” she gushed.

I dragged Matteo over and posed for pictures with Ivy’s fandom.

“We’re shipping you hard—Matsera.”

I laughed lightly. “So I’ve heard.”

“Are you two together?”

I smiled enigmatically into her camera phone. “We like each other.” I glanced up at Matteo.

“We more than like each other.” He reeled me in and gave me a very sordid kiss that was in no way PG-13.

As his tongue swept into my surprised mouth, I tasted the port wine he had with dessert. Coupled with the heady scent of his cologne, the caress of his tongue sent my senses reeling all the way to my core.

Gasps and squeals of delight echoed around us like the spin cycle of a washing machine.

When he broke off, the promise of something in his eyes sent a pulsing wetness between my legs into overdrive.

And I was going home with this man.

Oh shit, Ivy would kill me if I didn’t promote the store.

“So, what does Dominic De Lucci think of this relationship?” the Romero reporter asked.

While Matteo gave his family-standard spiel, I continued smiling for Ivy’s groupies.

“You all should try the Magicforme evening trousers.” I tugged my hand free of Matteo’s to give a slight spin. “And these shoes?” I stuck out my foot. “You live in Manhattan. You need them. I’ve never wore pointy-toed heels this comfy.”

“Is that Irina bustier comfortable?”

“Very. Donateka has all the sizes right now. This one is a size six.”

“Six? But you’re so tiny?”

“Why does everyone say that? I’m curvy and proud of these.” I pointed my fingers to my chest.

Everyone laughed.

Matteo caught my right hand and lowered it to his side. “Come on, baby.” He kissed the top of my head. “Let’s go home,” he whispered in my ear. “Those are mine tonight.”

Everyone swooned as though they heard what he was saying while my cheeks flamed.

A limousine waited for us. Wow, Matteo pulled out all the stops for this dog and pony show.

With my mind whirling in confusion at his motives and with Matteo’s face a mask, I wordlessly got into the vehicle. When he got in beside me, there might as well have been a mile between us. He stuck to his side of the door, while I inched closer to mine.

Like the previous night, Trevor knew where to go and the man beside me didn’t speak.

I was too tired to discern his mood.

My phone buzzed with a FaceTime call.

Ivy was squealing on the other end of the line when I answered it. “You guys were fabulous! A Page Six reporter was there. Romero might sell them the story,” Ivy said breathlessly.

“What? Romero and Matteo exchanged three sentences.”

“That’s more than enough for her, believe me. She’ll go with speculations of a possible union between the two families. All she needed was confirmation that there’s a relationship.”

I glanced at my date. He was checking his phone and ignoring me.

“Here, Daniel wants to speak to you.”

I intended to say no because Ivy's brother suddenly became a touchy subject. When Daniel's face filled the screen and a palpable blast of displeasure came from Matteo, I had confirmation.

"Hey, babe."

Oooh, that displeasure turned downright frosty.

"Thanks again for the clothes," I said.

"No. Thank you. You looked downright gorgeous. The clothes are so you..."

"Well..." He was laying it on thick.

"Anytime you need another..."

The phone disappeared from my hand.

"What the hell." I glared at Matteo who ended the call before he dropped the phone on my lap.

"As long as you're my girlfriend, you will not accept free clothes from the Wus."

"It goes to Donateka's promotional expense."

"Same difference." He typed a furious text on his phone.

I had an incoming one from Ivy. "Forgive my brother. He's a moron. Anyone can see Matteo was pissing a circle around you earlier."

Despite myself, I huffed a laugh.

Matteo cut a furious look my way. "Is he texting you?"

"Relax," I said. "That was Ivy. You and Daniel are suddenly pissing circles around me like I'm the lone fire hydrant in a dog park. What's up with that?"

Matteo didn't say anything and looked out the window again, but I didn't miss how his fingers spread and flexed over his knee.

I swallowed hard and looked out my window. I wasn't sure if I was turned on with how he seemed to be controlling his temper over his jealousy, or annoyed that he thought he had the right to be jealous.

This was a fake relationship.

But somehow over dinner, despite Matteo not hitting the mark with my preferences of street food over haute cuisine, I had so much fun. The wine was on point. I loved the way he listened as I talked about my nerdiness with academics. He seemed genuinely interested. That was more than I could say about my past dates, who were always nervous because they were afraid Luca would show up at any moment. My threat to Luca to stay out of my love life had come too late. The damage was already done.

But that was probably for the best too, because I was finding out I had no respect for a man who was afraid of my uncle. I wanted that man to love me enough to fight for me. Maybe that was why I was confused about my feelings for Daniel. I knew if he set his mind to it, he could face Luca. I'd seen him operate in the boardroom and cut his opponents down to size. He blew hot and cold, but one thing was for certain—I wasn't his priority.

I just wasn't worth the trouble to him, I guess, so I wish Daniel would stop with the mixed signals and let Matteo and me do our job to convince Santino there was no chance of an arranged marriage between us.

We spent the fifteen-minute car ride to Hell's Kitchen in silence. Trevor dropped us off at the back of the building the same way he did the night before and disappeared.

Matteo and I walked up the stairs, still not saying a word.

When he let us into the apartment, he let me walk in first. The click of the door was audible in the shifting moods of this silence between us.

He prowled ahead toward the living room and switched on the TV. "Here, let's see if your sacrifices for dear Daniel paid off."

My shoes clacked on the wooden floor before they got muffled on the Persian rug. "I don't know what your problem is. The optics were perfect and you know it. Donateka got

what it wanted. I hear you got what you wanted and Daniel is letting you take over the real estate deal.”

He speared me a look. “And how about you, Sera? Did you get what you want?”

I cleared my throat. “That’s just it, isn’t it? I’m the only one who doesn’t win in this.”

“You don’t have to marry Santino.”

“Luca won’t force me to marry him if I don’t want to.” My shoulders drooped a little. “But yes, seeing us together should turn him off.”

My mistake was being within reach of a clearly livid man. His arm snaked out and he snatched me against him, making me aware of the solid wall of hardness when my nails grasped his sides. I tamped down the raging ache between my legs. I was not turned on by this caveman.

“What’s your problem?” I repeated, sending my killer glare into his stormy blue eyes.

He searched my gaze. “You don’t know?”

“Jealousy is not a good look on you,” I fumed.

His brow arched mockingly. “Really?”

His fingers bunched the sheer top.

My eyes widened. “Don’t you dare—”

He yanked down, ripping the top in two. He tossed the ruined fabric on the couch.

I backed away. “You’re insane. Stay away from me.”

His eyes darkened. “Don’t,” he gritted. “Run. Away.”

I paused like a person confronted by a grizzly bear. “Stop being an asshole.”

His fists clenched at his sides. “I don’t like those clothes touching any inch of your skin.”

“Or what? You’re going to strip me naked?”

“Sera,” he growled. “Don’t test me.”

I didn't know what possessed me to challenge him by moving closer. The thrill of something else overwhelmed my initial outrage over Matteo's destructive behavior.

How far could I take him over the edge?

I stopped just in front of him.

His body was vibrating with the same need that was thrumming through mine. I went on tiptoe, my body swaying against his so that he had to steady me at the elbows.

Tilting my chin up, I whispered, "Or what?"

CHAPTER

Fourteen

MATTEO

My control snapped.

My fingers found their way to the back of the blasted corset that pushed her breasts to mouthwatering peaks and tested a man's self-control. My knees nearly went weak with relief when I found a zipper, not sure I had the patience to unravel the cords that pulled the thing together because my hunger to devour her tits was all-consuming. They had taunted me all evening, playing peekaboo with that see-through top which left nothing to the imagination at all.

Sera Moretti was no angel. She was a siren, a succubus put on this earth to seduce men and drag them into hell to suffer eternal blue balls.

When her tits sprang free, my hands automatically came up to claim them, my breathing ragged. "Holy fuck, you're perfect."

My thumbs brushed over her nipples.

Her cheeks pinkened. She stepped back as if realizing she'd awakened a beast and crossed her arms over her chest. "What are we doing?"

I gave a choked laugh and snagged the waist of her pants, hauling her back against me. "We're exploring," I whispered in her ear. "Take off my jacket."

"Wh-why?"

“Because I want you to want this as much as I do. I just want to taste you, Sera, but I don’t want to force you.”

“Taste me?” she croaked.

“Fuck your pussy with my tongue.”

Her pupils dilated, and she pursed the lips I wanted to devour. As I held my breath, her hands traveled the width of my chest before pushing the jacket off my shoulders. I let it drop to the floor. Her fingers returned to the open collar of my dress shirt before trailing down my torso. My abs tightened, and her touch zapped me all the way to my dick. “You’ve got me so hard, it’ll take a miracle not to sink into you, but I won’t.”

She cocked her head in puzzlement. Daniel had tainted this night and I intended to exorcise his presence in the only way I knew.

“Do you trust me?” I asked.

Her throat bobbed before she nodded. Not sparing a second for her to change her mind, my fingers unbuttoned her pants and lowered its zipper. I went down on my knees. My head was level just below her tits. My mouth watered to taste them, but I’d been hanging on to the way I intended to feast on Sera since the restaurant. I gave her my dessert. In turn, she was mine.

I peeled the pants off her hips, exposing lace panties. I could smell her arousal. It mixed with her scent, and the headiness made me press my nose against it.

I inhaled.

“Matteo...” she whispered.

I looked up at her, noticing her bottom lip caught between her teeth. She was glorious from this angle. At any angle, really. Without taking my eyes off her, I dipped my hand inside her panties. Her breathing came faster. My fingers encountered smooth skin—fuck, she was bare, and when the tips of them went lower, slickness coated them.

“You’re so wet, baby.” My voice was hoarse with a desperation that sounded foreign to my ears. All three of my fingers soaked up her arousal, and when I extracted them from her panties, with our gazes still locked, I lapped at each finger, closing my eyes at the exquisite taste.

“You’re so filthy,” she breathed.

I opened my eyes and grinned up at her. “Only for you.”

Doubt flashed through her face, but I had no intention of explaining to her when I couldn’t explain it to myself. I’d never been jealous or possessive before. This wasn’t about pride, but the burning sensation to make sure she knew she was mine.

Mine.

A feral possessiveness swept over me, and I shoved her onto the couch. Her ass plopped into a sitting position, and before she could find her bearings, I was in front of her, flicking the shoes off her feet.

“Hey,” she argued.

I pointed a finger at her.

Her jaw clenched mutinously, but her eyes flared with excitement.

She was with me.

Her eyes squinted when her pants followed the rest of her clothes on the couch.

“Did he pay for those, too?” I glared at her panties.

“Not saying.” Her face indicated she was catching on. “Are you going to destroy them too?”

“It doesn’t matter.” I unbuttoned my shirt. Damn straight I was going to feel those tits against my chest.

I positioned myself between her legs and ran my hands up her thighs. I’d never felt skin this soft. “You’re beautiful.”

She lowered her gaze and smiled, her hands tentative as she touched my open shirt. I nodded, and she slowly stripped it

from my body.

“God, you’re sculpted,” she said. “Not an ounce of fat. Do you run your office from the gym?”

I didn’t answer her, too busy deciding what to do with her first. Collaring her with one hand, I brushed my thumb against her lips. Our gazes locked before I brought her in for a kiss.

Her lips opened to receive me, and at first I went slow, my tongue tasting chocolate but then again it was the essence of her that was driving me crazy. I started devouring every part of her mouth. A groan rumbled up my throat and she moaned into my mouth.

Game over. It would be a miracle if I didn’t end up fucking her raw.

I made her lie on top of the discarded clothes, easing her legs on the couch. I stood and put a knee on the cushion, positioning my hips between her thighs. I could feel the heat of her through my pants. My mouth trailed her jaw as my hands palmed her tits. Everything about her body was made for me. My tongue laved around a nipple before I sucked it in. Once satisfied, I let go and trailed a path to the next one and did the same.

Fingers clawed into my hair. She pushed my head lower.

I released the nipple and teased under it.

“Matteo, I need you lower.”

I glanced up at her and traced her damp panties with a finger. “Are you hurting right here, baby?”

“Yes.”

“How badly do you want to come?”

“Bad.” Her breath hitched.

I didn’t want to torture her exactly, but I still harbored a seething resentment of Daniel from tonight. Unleashing it on her pussy was the only way that would appease my jealousy. I kissed down her belly, relishing the goose bumps that appeared on my way down. Sera made an audible gasp when I

lifted her thighs and set them on my shoulders. I was in perfect position for the dessert I was waiting for. I nuzzled my nose against the dampness of her panties, willingly drowning in the addictive scent of her arousal.

“Don’t tease,” she moaned.

Nudging the panties aside, I bared her pussy for my inspection. My tongue lashed at her center. When she arched her spine, I pushed down on her pelvis.

I glanced up. “All I want to hear is—Oh God, yes, and Matteo. Any other word and I stop. Clear?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl.”

Her acquiesce drove me feral. I didn’t know how I managed to slip her panties off so fast, but when they dangled off her left foot, I dove back in and attacked her pussy.

“Matteo!”

My name on her lips only spurred me to lick her harder, but I was also learning what she wanted. I inserted a finger and probed her for her sweet spot. In and out. In and out.

She cried out, “Yes, oh my God.”

She was so responsive, so perfect, so fucking mine.

I stroked my tongue up and down to prolong her pleasure and she was an incoherent mess by the time I had my fill. After I gave her one last lick, I bolted up her body to give her a taste of herself. My fingers continued to wring out her orgasm. Having her moan in my mouth was making it hard to hold back my release. I needed to come.

When we broke apart, she whispered, “You’re so hard.”

I realized I was grinding against her pussy.

“I’m ready to explode,” I admitted. “You’re so damn sexy.”

“Can I do anything?”

Her meaning was clear. I touched her lips. “No. Not yet. Not this time.”

Her brows furrowed. “Then...what are you...”

“Can I come on your tits?” I asked.

Her eyes widened, and then narrowed, but not with annoyance—with amusement. “You’re such a caveman.”

“I want you to watch me, all right?”

“Can I stroke it though?” she asked.

“Take me out.”

Her eyes gleamed with excitement. Jesus. I dug everything about her.

She sat up, unbuckled my belt, lowered my zipper, and then very reverently she wrapped her hand around my erection.

She stroked.

I groaned. “Don’t. I’m close. Lie down.”

She propped up on her elbows.

I started stroking my cock. My eyes on her. She watched me, fascinated.

And fuck me if Sera watching me masturbate wasn’t a whole level of hotness.

I pumped my cock faster and faster. My breaths came in quickly and shallow. It didn’t take long. I’d been on the edge, horny as fuck, and eaten up with jealousy since this afternoon.

My cock grew rock hard. Cum spurted. Ropes of it landed on her tits, on her chin, on her torso.

Pushing her aside, I let the rest land on the clothes Daniel had given her. An instinct, primal and claiming, drove me to squeeze every single drop to mark her as mine.

I dragged in an almighty breath, spent, before I collapsed against the opposite side of the couch.

I didn't know where I found the energy to lift up an arm toward her. I didn't even have the strength for words.

She looked at the mess on her chest and on the clothes.

She shook her head, grinned, and took my hand.

I pulled her on top of me.

She laughed. Music to my ears.



Sera

A young girl stared at me. She couldn't be more than five.

I peeked underneath the blanket to make sure I had clothes on. To my relief, I did. Flashes of my naked body under Matteo's mercy flushed my cheeks. The ways he tasted me. I gave myself a mental headshake. Now was not the time to have an X-rated reel.

"Your name is Sera." It was a statement not a question.

"Yes." I sat up on the bed. "And you are?"

"Samantha," she said. She had pretty blue eyes like Matteo. I wasn't sure where she got her freckles and blonde hair from. "But you can call me Sam." She held up her penguin stuffed toy. "This is Alfie."

"Where is...?"

"Uncle Matteo is with my dad. They went to see Uncle Dom."

"That's a lot of uncles," I teased. The De Luccis were a closer-knit clan than the Morettis. Keeping our family on the same page gave Luca a headache. That was what happened when your grandfather had three wives and his children didn't get along.

"Sam?" A young woman pushed through the door with an apologetic look on her face. "I'm so sorry." She had straight

golden hair that fell silkily over her shoulders framing her oval face. I hated my curls and wanted straight hair until I found a way to live with it courtesy of better hair products. The angst of my teenage war with the straightening wand niggled at the back of my mind.

I was sure this woman was Liz and Sam was her daughter.

She walked in with a limp, favoring her right leg. It was subtle, but it was there. This dug up recollections of a story where the enemies of the De Luccis targeted Matteo's youngest brother. The details were scarce, and I wondered if her limp was from an injury sustained from that time.

"Hi," we both said at the same time.

"The boys have a meeting," she said. "I'm Liz, by the way."

I smiled. "I guess you already know my name."

"This is Sam." She put her hands on the little girl's shoulders. "She's four."

"Mama, can I have curly hair like hers when I grow up?"

I laughed. "Oh, you don't know how lucky you are to have straight hair."

"I've got coffee and croissants," Liz offered.

My eyes perked up. I swung my legs from the bed. "Matteo said I should try the ones from your bakeshop."

"Renz made them this morning," she added. "Come on, Sam. Let's leave Sera alone so she can join us."

"I want a croissant all to myself," Sam announced.

A girl after my own heart. Viva le butter.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

MATTEO

“How serious are you about my cousin?” Dom asked.

“We’re serious about seeing where this goes,” I said. Dom was Paulie and Carlotta’s son. He looked easy-going, talked like he was easy-going. But behind those flashy clothes and winning smile was the calculating boss of the De Lucci crime family. But I didn’t think he would stick his nose into my love life. No. It was someone else. “Is Luca making you ask this?”

He grinned. “He *is* my uncle. And he wasn’t too happy about the publicity yesterday.” Dom had called this meeting for our side of the family. This was when the illegitimate and legitimate sides clashed and caused friction.

“He didn’t call me.”

“It was a boss-to-boss matter.”

“Bullshit,” Nico snarled. “Is he invoking the made-men crap again?”

“You really should let go of that imagined prejudice. It’s only in your head.”

“Then he should’ve called me,” I pointed out calmly. When my brother started losing his temper, it was up to me to balance it out. “It made more sense.”

“He wasn’t sure if you had the knowledge of the security surrounding Sera.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t demanded her back on the plane.”

“He considered it.”

I arched a brow. “So what swayed him to let her stay?”

Dom shrugged. “Something about not making the same mistake again.”

“Is this about Sera’s boyfriend who nearly became fish food?” I asked.

“It’s become a Chicago urban legend. For someone as young as Luca, that’s a feat.”

“Or a curse for people around him,” I muttered.

Dom eyed me. “So you’re not one tiny bit afraid of Luca?”

“Not in the least. What does he want?”

“From what he said and from our own sources, there’s turmoil within the Galluzo clans. They’re split on what to do about Santino.”

“Where’s that fucker now?”

“Word on the street is Frankie Rossi is hiding him.” Francesco “Frankie” Rossi was the boss of the Rossi crime family.

“I’m not liking this.”

“Rossi’s men ventured into our territory early this morning.”

“What?” My brows furrowed. “Was The Turk involved in this?”

“Sandro is minding his business as far as I know. Which is surprising that you turned up at his club.”

“It’s neutral ground.” I didn’t want to tell him that it was Sera and Ivy who went there. “You should have told me sooner that Rossi’s men crossed into our territory.”

“I’m telling you now,” Dom said. “Need to know, cuz. It’s for your own protection. They were bar-hopping close to here.”

“They’re casing our stronghold.”

“Yes. When they got too close to this building and since the coffee shop was already closed, our men turned them around.”

I looked at Renz. My youngest brother’s family lived on the second floor of this building. “You want me to take Sera back to the Upper East Side?”

“No,” Dom sighed. “We don’t have enough eyes there. It would have helped if you and Nico moved into Hell’s Kitchen.”

“This hasn’t been a problem before,” I said.

“It is now when you stole the bride of a Galluzo capo,” Dom said. “This wasn’t the way we discussed about weakening their organization. We didn’t want to start a war.”

“What did you think would happen when I went after the shares?” I asked.

“Truth?” Dom said. “I didn’t think you could pull it off.”

The smile I gave him was all teeth.

“But I knew better than to underestimate you,” he said. “But back to my question. Is what’s going on between you and Sera serious because I need to know before I back up your relationship.”

“It’s serious,” I said without hesitation.

Nico made a sound in the back of his throat indicating surprise. I speared him with a warning. He, Daniel, and Trevor were the only ones who knew it was fake, but things had shifted with Sera. I wasn’t sure I was ready for us to end.

“Okay. Best thing is to have you guys out of the city.”

“And look like we’re running? No fucking way.”

“Think of it as a vacation. If Frankie goes with Galluzo, we don’t have enough people to watch over all the De Luccis and the last thing I want is to have Chicago send their soldiers.”

“Agreed.” I thought about the piss-poor job Rocco and Tony had done. “We haven’t worked with them before.”

“And there’s no telling where Luca’s loyalties lie,” Dom said. “My uncle has always been fucking unpredictable, but he’s protective of Sera and I’d like to think he doesn’t want to go to war with us either. There’s that at least.”

I winked. “Carlotta will have his ass.”

Laughter went around the room.

Still smiling, my cousin said, “We have three compounds from here to Maine. You choose.”

I didn’t have to think twice. “Maine.”



Sera

“We’re going to Maine, baby.”

Our heads turned toward the door when the men marched in. I was taken aback by Liz’s husband. The youngest De Lucci was as big as his brothers, but was rougher around the edges and I couldn’t imagine him in a suit, but he was sure rocking that close-cropped hair, muscled tee, sleeve tattoos, earring in one ear, and torn jeans.

“Hi, Uncle Nico, Matteo,” Sam called from the living room where she was watching cartoons after finishing breakfast.

“That’s your husband?” I turned big eyes to Liz just as Matteo reached us.

He gripped my chin with his thumb and forefinger and turned my gaze back to him. “Eyes on me, yeah, baby?”

I rolled my eyes, but not before he planted a kiss on my lips.

Renz cast his brother an amused glance. “Have we entered the twilight zone and my high and mighty big brother has succumbed to the De Lucci curse?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Matteo left my side to join his brother in the kitchen.

“Do you want a cappuccino, Sera?” Liz asked me. “Renz makes the best.”

“Hey, I do okay,” Matteo said.

“When you’re in the same room with me, coffee is my domain,” Renz told him.

While the eldest and the youngest bickered, the middle one plopped himself beside us.

“So, what exactly is the De Lucci curse?” I asked Liz. “Paulie mentioned it.”

“It’s a myth,” Nico said. “Lorenzo wants to perpetuate it.” He lowered his voice and looked over to where Sam was still riveted on the television. “Because of his raging hormones, he got Liz pregnant and blamed it on the curse.”

“Oh, I believe in the curse.” Liz winked at me. “It’s said that some De Lucci men only love once.”

“Now don’t go planting crazy ideas in her head, Liz,” Matteo called from the kitchen.

“Obviously it doesn’t apply to you,” I retorted.

“Why do you say that?” The man in question looked offended.

“Ivy said Nico’s and your love lives resembled the ticket counter at a deli bar,” I said.

“Oh she did, did she?” Nico said. “And why was Miss Wu investigating my love life?”

“Did I just say you?”

“I find it interesting, that’s all,” he muttered.

“You’re doing it wrong,” Renz scolded Matteo.

“What are you two up to?” Liz asked.

“Older brother here wants to make the cappuccino for Sera.”

“Aw,” I teased. As nonchalant as I made it sound, my heart’s pitter-patter skipped a beat. Matteo’s gaze met mine briefly across the room. The corner of his mouth was tilted in a ghost of a smile that made him look incredibly hot.

“So going back to the curse.” An impish smile formed on Liz’s lips. “They said that De Lucci men get very obsessed and singularly focused over a woman and there’s no escape.”

“Well, what if the woman isn’t interested?” I asked.

Nico started chuckling. “That could be a problem.”

“Were you interested in Renz?”

“She made me work for it,” Renz said in between the latte art lessons he was giving Matteo. “Hold it in the middle. It’s all about symmetry.”

“He was too cocky,” Liz said. “And I wasn’t interested in a bad boy.”

“You just didn’t know you needed this bad boy,” Renz replied without looking at his wife and was frowning at what Matteo was doing. “For f-freak’s sake, you ruined it.” He grabbed the cup from his brother and slid it over the counter.

“Nico. Take this.”

“I don’t want a cappuccino.” Nico glowered at the cup in front of him like he’d been handed the biggest insult.

“Well, we’re not giving this to Sera.” Renz pointed to Matteo. “Make another one.”

He scowled. “You’re bossy.”

“Like I said, big brother, coffee is my domain.”

Liz translated for me. “Matteo has typical oldest brotheritis.”

“Uhm, always sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong?”

Then the strangest thing happened. Liz’s smile dropped from her face and her eyes became unfocused before she

forced a small smile—which looked really fake because I’d seen her genuine one. She averted her gaze to look at Sam. “You doing okay there, sweetie?”

Her daughter gave a thumbs up.

“Right,” Nico was the one who answered.

“Ah, easy-peasy.” Matteo’s triumphant voice cut through our discussion.

We all watched him approach, holding a cup and saucer as he carefully laid it down, perfect latte art on top.

“Oh, yum, so you’re an expert now?”

“That’s pushing it,” Renz laughed. “Wipe the sweat off your forehead, bro.”

“Fuck off.”

“Kid in the room,” Liz warned.

“You know that’s useless, right?” Nico said. “She’ll be cussing like a sailor in another year.”

“I’m trying to preserve her innocence for as long as I can,” his sister-in-law quipped.

“That didn’t last for Bianca.” A fond smile curved Matteo’s mouth. “She said a cuss word when she was in kindergarten. Mom and Dad got called in.”

I laughed. “Must be hard when you’ve got three older brothers.”

“You got that right. So what’s this going to Maine?” Liz asked.

“We knew someone would have a problem with my relationship with Sera,” Matteo said.

“Just to give context,” Renz said. “Sera was supposed to enter an arranged marriage with Santino Conte.”

“Luca suggested it.” I was getting tired of repeating myself. “I considered it. Maybe I should just put a statement in the *New York Times*.”

“You’ve got a live wire there, bro,” Nico commented.

“Santino thought I was a foregone conclusion,” I shared in annoyance.

Using his ankle, Matteo tugged my barstool close and murmured in my ear. “Now you’re mine.”

I wasn’t sure if we were acting. Wait a minute. We were past acting. This man gave me my best orgasm and made me scream his name and God’s over and over. Plus, he marked my freaking boobs!

I gave him a narrowed look, but he treated it like a playful game and kissed me. “Talk later.”

“Aw...” Liz sighed, turning to Renz. “You’re like him.”

“I’ve got better moves,” Matteo’s youngest brother grumbled.

Two hours later, Matteo had me packed in his Jaguar and on our way to Maine. I didn’t even notice until we got on I-95 that there were two Suburbans following us.

I’d been distracted because I’d been talking to Luca for the past fifteen minutes. My uncle was willing to go with whatever I wanted, but there was a nagging feeling he really wanted me to stay here in New York.

“Don’t you miss me?” I asked, a tad suspicious.

“I can’t have you underfoot.”

“You make me sound like a puppy.”

He sighed. “I’m busy.”

“You were all ready to fly over here when you couldn’t get a hold of me.”

“I was worried then because no one could produce you. I made sure De Lucci knew his days will be numbered if a single hair on your head is harmed.”

“I wish you wouldn’t make me sound so fragile.”

“You’re far from fragile. Doesn’t mean I don’t worry.”

“Are you up to something?”

He exhaled an irritated breath. “Like what?”

“No side business with the Russians about drugs, okay?” I knew he steered clear from human trafficking too, so I wasn’t worried there.

“Not right now.”

“Luca—”

“*Cara*, the only time I deal with those products is as a favor. When an organization wants to use our ship, I don’t monetize from it. I allow it because it’s important to have allies.”

“Mafia goodwill,” I said dryly.

“Exactly,” he said. “Maybe in a few weeks you can bring Matteo for a visit.”

I gave an incredulous laugh. “And have him subjected to your inspection.”

“I’m not that bad,” Luca protested.

“You’re forgetting the reputation you earned after you dragged David from my apartment in nothing but a towel—”

“—the Hillside gang was using him to get to me.”

“—and bundled him into a car and drove off. You have no idea how that ruined my reputation. No one dared date me again for a long time.”

My uncle muttered something about doing it for my own good.

I glanced over at Matteo because I felt a sudden interest from him in my conversation. He was staring straight ahead, but his fingers had stopped drumming the steering wheel.

“Anyway. You have all our contact numbers.” I ended the call.

I exhaled a long-suffering sigh.

“Everything okay?” Matteo asked.

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t sound like it.”

“It’s really nothing. This reminds me why I don’t want to be away from Chicago sometimes.”

“The place or the family.”

I angled my eyes at him. “The family.”

“You’re not Luca’s keeper.”

Taken aback by his statement, I said, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He stayed quiet for a while before saying, “You’re right. We’ll talk, but not here when I can’t give it my full attention.”

“Where?”

“You’re so impatient,” he tsked. “I’ve got plans. Something tells me you’ll love it.”

I was reflected in his aviator shades, so I couldn’t really tell what he was thinking about.

“Shouldn’t we be lying low?”

“Dom just told me he’s got eyes on Conte and his men. Where we’re going is a De Lucci stronghold.”

I shook my head. Even when I’d grown up in the famiglia, it still amazed me that there were marked territories in the mafia, where the typical American wasn’t aware of another world running alongside their existence.

I guess that was why it was called the underworld.

“Plans, huh?” I held my tongue. We were going to Maine. Of course I knew what his plans were, but I held my tongue because I couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

SERA

“Oh my God, I was ready to snap your head off,” I groaned as I bit into the most succulent lobster roll. Was it only last night when I was eating this with a fork and a knife?

This was way better.

We were sitting at an outdoor table. It was a bit chilly. But the view of the waves crashing against rocks was part of the seaside charm. Matteo gave me his jacket since I was unprepared.

“You’ve dribbled butter down your chin,” Matteo said.

I tried to swipe it with my tongue. “Did I get it all?”

His eyes darkened. Slowly, he put down his own sandwich, partly rose from his chair and leaned over to nibble at the corner of my chin, before landing a kiss on my lips. “There, that’s better.”

Trevor was at another table, out of earshot, with a few bodyguards whose names I’d forgotten.

“Are we still pretending?”

Matteo’s laughter rumbled in his chest. “We’re past pretend since I had my tongue deep in your pussy.”

My mouth fell open. This was the first time he’d made direct reference to our encounter last night. His eyes fell on

my lips, and before he bit into his sandwich, he muttered something that made my ears burn.

“Matteo? What are we doing?” I asked in a hushed whisper.

He finished his sandwich, balled the wrapper, and dropped it on his plate, and pointed between us. “I wanna see where this goes.”

“And when did you make this decision?”

“On our way here.”

I cocked my head in dubious disbelief. “Really. Getting me to Maine, in the middle of nowhere, wasn’t premeditated?”

“I didn’t plan it,” he said. “You’ve talked to your uncle.”

This was true.

“I don’t like feeling trapped.”

“You make it sound like I have you here under duress.”

“What changed?”

“I’m liking you more than Daniel,” Matteo said. “And you’re not seeing him while you’re in my bed.”

“Wait a minute. That’s not possible. You’re forgetting, they’re my friends first before you.”

“I’m more than your friend,” he said.

“And I’m not in your bed.”

“Yet.”

Before I could say another word, he cut in, “In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve grown more possessive of you...”

“Uh-oh, am I a recipient of the De Lucci curse.”

“I wouldn’t believe that bullshit.” He brushed it off.

“Okay, so the possessiveness you’re feeling,” I said slowly. “This has never happened with your girlfriends before?” I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hear the answer, but the gauntlet was thrown.

He took a big swig from his beer bottle without answering.

After a few seconds, I prodded. “Well?”

“I feel like you’re asking a trick question.”

“I won’t feel bad if you say yes,” I said. That was a lie, but like a masochist, I wanted to know.

“And if I say no?”

“Maybe I’d run the other way screaming.”

“See, it’s a trick question and you’re lying if you say you won’t feel bad because no woman wants to know that her boyfriend was feeling the same way about an ex.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of mansplaining there.”

The corners of his mouth tipped up.

“You’re not answering, are you?”

“It’s too soon to tell. How about you?”

I tilted my head in question.

His jaw tightened. “Are you going to pine for Daniel while we’re trying to see where this goes because that shit is not going to fly with me.”

“Did anybody tell you that you’re a demanding date? Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Shouldn’t I be the one making demands?”

In reality, I hadn’t thought much about Daniel ever since Matteo spectacularly marked me with his cum last night. I guess that should have clued me in on the type of boyfriend he was going to be. Shit. Was I considering this?

“I brought you here. To the best lobster shack in Maine.”

Before I could respond, he added, “And you didn’t need to ask me. I paid attention.”

I pressed my lips together in tickled mirth. He did pay attention. Not to mention how endearing it was he learned to make latte art for me.

“Taking me here is sweet, and so was this morning’s cappuccino.”

He quirked his brow in a “see?” gesture.

I rolled my eyes. “Not too long ago we were trying to make Daniel jealous.”

“Did you miss the part where I said I was liking you more than Daniel?”

“No. But something more must have changed.”

He contemplated his words. “You deserve so much more. I backed off when I thought Daniel was interested, but now, with Santino after you...”

I stilled. “Are you saying this is because of chivalry?”

Matteo chuckled in that deep rumble. For that alone, I didn’t mind seeing where this went. I didn’t know why I was fighting it. Here was a man who wasn’t daunted by my family name, who could probably be as stubborn as Luca who was the biggest obstacle to my love life. Plus, Matteo grew up knowing the life.

“Chivalry? I don’t think chivalry had anything to do with marking you as mine.”

“You’re such a caveman.” My cheeks grew warm. I resisted the urge to hold the ice-cold blueberry soda bottle to my skin. This man made me warm all over. Would I have gone all the way with him? Or would I have stopped him?

His eyes gleamed as if he knew the direction of my thoughts. “I didn’t want to fuck you before you were ready.”

“Oh excuse me? And you thought I was ready to have your cum all over me.”

“You were wearing clothes bought for you by another man,” he argued.

“So if it were my own clothes, you wouldn’t have done it?”

“The temptation would be there. It’s been there since the night I brought you back to the apartment. You make me lose

control.” He grinned in self-deprecation. “All through dinner last night I dreamt of ways to strip those clothes off you. I was thankful for the tablecloth.”

“Oh my God.” Realization dawned on me. “I was busy eating dinner across from you while you were sporting a hard-on.”

“I should have beat one out in the shower before meeting you.” He smirked.

“Matteo.” I held out both my arms in a helpless gesture. “I don’t know what this is between us. Real or fake?”

“It’s real.” He frowned. “I thought I made myself clear.”

“Not clear enough to me. Honestly, I don’t like the way you say it.”

He seemed taken aback. “Explain.”

“See where this goes?” I shook my head. “It’s like you have one foot out the door before we have even tried.”

“I don’t want to make a commitment...”

“Every time I hear a guy say this... How are you different from Daniel?”

He muttered an expletive. “You’re right.”

“I don’t think I’m cut out for casual,” I said. “I never was. And before you think it’s because of religion, if that were the case, I would have gone up in smoke every time I crossed the threshold of our church.”

He grinned. “You’re saying you’re not a prude.”

I leaned in closer. “I let you come all over my boobs. Prude is not in my vocabulary, but I’m not that way with just any guy.”

“I never thought you were.”

“I think I’m kind of liking you more than Daniel too.”

“I sure hope so.” His brows drew together again.

“I haven’t thought much about him since last night.”

His eyes gleamed in a way that told me he was thinking of the same moment as I was when he started to erase Daniel's hold on my thoughts. "Good. Maybe marking you is working and I should do it more."

"Do you always use sex as a weapon?"

He paused, took a sip of his beer, and thought some more. Finally, he said, "Dammit. It only seems it's with you."

I preened a little. I was finding I liked it when Matteo was possessive and he was annoyed at himself that he was. There was nothing more satisfying than a man who couldn't help how he reacted, especially one who calculated his moves like the man before me.

"Where are we staying tonight?"

"The family has a compound in Bar Harbor. We'll be meeting with a few of our men first."

"When you mean family compound does it mean *family*?"

"Dad owns it, but he lets Dom use it for his men as long as it's not for mob business."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "It's impressive how your dad has kept De Lucci Transnational's reputation clean."

He didn't say anything again but guzzled his beer.

"You know," I said. "Sooner or later what we can share or cannot share between us is going to be an issue if we go ahead with this relationship."

Matteo drained his beer and then leaned in. Something funny crossed his face before saying, "If you're done, we can meet the other guys, then head to the compound."

I had a feeling those weren't the words he'd been about to say.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

MATTEO

I was a colossal idiot.

I nearly suggested it might be better if we got married.

That was totally out of left field, De Lucci. What could be more confusing? Every fiber of my being didn't hesitate to embrace the idea. It was only my logical brain that shut it down. Fortunately, I wasn't like Nico who speaks before he thinks.

But as I stared at Sera, I wanted to find out everything about this fascinating woman. I wanted to find out why she seemed to worry about Luca instead of letting her uncle worry about her. She worried about everyone around her. She took it upon herself to head the charities her family supported.

Trevor caught my eyes from across the room and nodded.

Our Maine allies were en route to our meeting point.

I turned off my phone because of all the alerts I had been getting from the office. I'd left the running of the company to Nico and Jonas. Mrs. Mancini was anxious for another audience since Dad refused to take her calls. As for Gustavo, I was giving him twenty-four hours to stew.

Dom had the pulse on Santino and the Rossis, so I wasn't worried on that front and we were clear into our organization's territory.

What I was too chicken to examine was at what point Sera had become my priority. “We need to go.”

I saw the disappointment on her face as she glanced longingly at the ocean. “I thought we could walk on the beach?”

“There’ll be plenty of opportunities for that. Let me ensure your safety first.”

She gave a small nod and we rose from our table.

One of my men took care of the check, so we piled into our vehicles and headed to the rendezvous point.

We pulled into an unpaved parking lot that visitors used to check out the lighthouse. At this time of the night the area was closed to the public. Not to us though.

Two motorcycles, an old Ford truck, and another SUV were already waiting for us. Ronan McGrath, or simply called Boston, was the leader of the Archer Syndicate of the northern states that included Vermont, Maine, and Massachusetts.

“Stay inside,” I told Sera.

“Who are they?”

“My cousin...”

She squinted. “Really. Are they...?”

“There are things I can’t share with you right now, baby, but trust me, *capisce?*”

“I don’t see a reason not to trust you,” she said softly. “You fed me the best lobster ever.”

I shook my head, trying not to grin, and gave her a stern look instead. “You’re a big security risk, do you know that?”

“Why, because I love a good lobster roll?”

“I should keep that off your file,” I mumbled, pushing out of the vehicle. I had visions of someone who wanted to kidnap her by dangling a lobster roll in front of her.

As I walked toward my cousin, I quickly wiped the amusement off my face.

“The rumors are true,” Ronan said.

“Cuz,” I said, as we thumped each other on the back. “What rumors?”

“The De Lucci curse has struck again.” The razzing in his tone came through loud and clear.

“The fuck you talking about?” I retorted with no heat in my statement.

“You bring her to a meeting,” Ronan said. “She’s not part of the Syndicate. This tells me you’re serious about involving her.”

“Sorry to dispel that rumor you seem to find so much amusement in,” I said. “But she’s at the center of this meeting.”

He looked past me, and then back at me again. “Got her file. Moretti’s niece, huh? You’ve got some balls on you.”

“Why is everyone treating Moretti like the bogeyman? Anyway, I’d like to take Sera home. She’s tired.”

I greeted the guys on his crew. Some I knew, others I knew by file. Though Ronan had final say who joined his group—soldiers known as Arrows—their information was stored in a central database in the basement of The Grindhouse we called The Grindhouse Underground, or simply The Underground.

I took over as the Archer of Manhattan last year which encompassed many territories all over the world because it was business central. Nico was my lieutenant and Trevor was my sergeant at arms. We were not a club, but an organization that had several factions all over the world. Our goal is simple—make sure organized crime is controlled. Daniel was the Archer of South East Asia, but we worked together frequently because organized crime had become more sophisticated in using big companies for moving products. This was part of our plan to stop the Galluzo mafia from getting too powerful.

But this time it wasn’t business. I still had to let Boston know I was in their territory and needed for them to be aware of what was brewing in Manhattan.

We quickly touched based on the areas that needed extra eyes. Some of his men would be guards at the compound.

Like Dom, Ronan teased me about stealing the Galluzo's bride.

"Happy for you, cuz," Ronan said.

"You make it sound like a ball and chain."

He gave a smirk that I wanted to wipe off his face. Ronan didn't say much but he'd been less reclusive in the past year. We briefed each other on outstanding issues regarding Archer business.

"Okay, catch you later." I clasped him around the neck and brought him close. I didn't realize how much I missed this cousin of mine. The past year had been hectic living up to Dad. After nodding to the rest of the crew, I returned to the Jaguar.

Sera was silent, but I could hear the cogs in her brain clicking.

When we returned to the main road, my convoy turned right with an additional vehicle from Ronan's crew, while Ronan and the rest of his guys turned left.

It was another thirty-minute drive to the compound. We would be staying a week or so. At least, until Dad and Mom returned from their European trip. I glanced over at Sera, a bit apprehensive.

Was it possible to know a woman yet at the same time know her very little? I couldn't figure out what end was up or down when it came to her. She was a mystery, and sometimes I felt like she was an open book with her heart on her sleeve.

Speaking of sleeve, my eyes fell to the bracelet she'd been wearing. The same one I noticed from dinner last night.

"What's on your mind?" Sera asked.

"I could have asked you the same."

"I asked you first."

I grinned. “Fair enough. I was thinking about your bracelet.”

“Oh.” Her right hand wrapped around the wrist that was wearing it. “What about it?”

There was a wariness in her tone, almost a defensiveness.

I hoped she didn’t think that I was criticizing its simplicity or its seemingly lack of monetary worth. “I was curious. I couldn’t make out what was on the coin.”

“Oh, it’s St. Rita.”

“St. Rita? The name of the charity running the soup kitchen?”

“Yes. I bought it when I went to Italy. In her hometown.”

Interesting. “You did a pilgrimage?”

“Well, not exactly. I wanted to learn more about her life.”

“And?”

She continued to look at me.

I gave her a brief glance. “What?”

“You’re the only person other than Ivy who has asked me about her.” Her voice cracked, then she inhaled and blew out a breath.

“That’s good though, right?” It was my turn to sound wary.

“Yes, but now I’ll have to really, really like you.”

A chuckle vibrated in my throat and gusted past my lips. “Well, then, I’m all ears. Tell me about her.”



Sera

There was no artifice in Matteo’s question, and I didn’t know why I’d gotten so emotional about it. St. Rita was very close to

my heart. I was not a devout Catholic, but she'd been a part of my childhood.

“When I was eight, I had a nanny named Rita,” I said. “She had a very sad face. She had a hard life.” I turned the bracelet over and over. “She had an abusive husband. Physically abusive.”

“Was the husband still alive when she worked for the Morettis?”

“No. He had died the year before. He was a drunk. Liver cirrhosis. Anyway, the nuns of St. Rita took her in. Her birth name wasn't Rita by the way. She had changed her name because she felt she found her calling by helping out at the soup kitchen.”

“How did she come to work for the Morettis?”

“We were at a charity event one time and Mamma was having one of her nervous...” I caught myself. “Mamma had a terrible time that year.” It had been the first real attempt on Papà's life. “Miss Rita volunteered at first, and then Mamma became too dependent on her. She told me the stories about St. Rita.”

Matteo made a turn onto a narrow road. The car passed through an unpaved section. He cursed violently when rocks pelted the vehicle. Like all men I knew who loved expensive sports cars, I noticed Matteo treated the Jaguar like his baby.

“We probably should have taken another car,” I laughed.

“I can't impress a girl with Suburbans,” he muttered.

“The car doesn't make the man,” I said. “You shouldn't let it define you.”

“I was kidding, Sera.” There was amusement in his tone.

“I'm not usually this philosophical. You just had me talking about Miss Rita.”

“St. Rita is a patron saint of...abused wives?”

“Not only them, but the impossible and widows. It's her life that fascinates me because it parallels mine a bit.”

The air turned chilly in the car. “Did your father or Luca abuse you?”

“Oh, no. No.” I blew out a breath.

“When did you lose your parents?”

“When I was ten,” I said.

“Your father and not Luca was supposed to be the boss, right?”

“Emilio Moretti Junior, first wife’s son.” I hadn’t even been born yet when my grandmother died. The merry widower was what they called my grandfather, Emilio Moretti Sr. Luca joked that I was going to be named Emilia Moretti III. “It’s no secret that the Moretti men had a temper. It’s probably what got Papà killed. We were actually surprised Nonno had survived so long when he had made many enemies because of the famous Moretti temper.”

“I’m sorry you lost your parents at a young age.”

“Live by the sword, die by the sword,” I said sadly. “Nonno and Luca made up for my parents’ absence and my nanny was like a mother to me.” I didn’t want him to pity me, so I brought the subject back to something I was comfortable to discuss. “Anyway, I’ve got a story to tell. How much time do we have?”

“I’ll drive in circles if you want me to,” he said.

I gave a short burst of laughter and started my tale of Margherita Lotti. As Matteo drove us to our destination, I told him how she was born to elderly parents, a miracle in itself. She held herself pure and wanted to join the convent. In the end her parents arranged a marriage for her to a noble man who was cruel and abusive. But she was renowned to have humility and patience and had been a good housewife. She made it her mission to convert her husband.

“That is...” Matteo seemed to be at a loss for words. “And you want to be like her?”

“No. I just found parallels that she was able to convert her husband into a better person.”

“I guess that’s admirable.” He side-eyed me. “But is that what your aspiration is in an arranged marriage? Make an asshole like Santino a saint?”

“Of course not!” I retorted. “You’re missing the point.”

“I don’t see you as a meek wife.”

“Being patient is not being meek.”

“Tell me you’re still not considering marrying that bastard.”

“I’m not. I’m with you, aren’t I?”

“Damn right you are.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds before he cast me a brief glance. “That’s it?”

“I don’t think I want to tell you more if you’re going to make fun of me.”

“I wasn’t making fun of your story. I’m just trying to understand your fascination with her.”

“But I’m not blindly following her. In some cases it’s not possible, especially with the way the *family* works.”

“What do you mean?”

“St. Rita’s husband was murdered. She forgave her husband’s murderer at the funeral. I don’t know if I have that kind of charity in me.”

“You’ll never know until you’re in that situation.”

“True, but...” I cut off.

“But what?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. What were you about to say?”

“I don’t think we’re at that point yet.”

He didn’t answer, but I think he understood what I meant. We didn’t talk to outsiders about what went on in the family. According to my uncle, the De Luccis’ businesses were too layered to tell which one was legitimate and which one wasn’t.

There was a rumor for years that they had a deal with the Feds and they started a covert organization that policed the underworld. His cousin Ronan's crew didn't scream mob soldiers either. They looked to be former military just like Trevor.

"Are we almost there?" I was desperate to be alone. We were not at the point to share family secrets, but we were standing close to its precipice. Like we just needed to make the jump, otherwise we would be forever skirting around an issue that could grow into resentment.

Secrets do that.

"Entrance is coming up," he said shortly. His tone was clipped.

God, Sera, you've only gone on two dates and it hasn't even been twenty-four hours. He'd been in my life for only a week. But it exposed the kind of problems we could face and why a relationship between us could be tricky.

Loyalties.

That was why there were arranged marriages between mafia families. To preserve alliances and loyalties because without it, betrayals were easier. With marriage, it would be about honor. And one thing I knew from growing up in the family, honor among made men was synonymous with their masculine pride.

When Luca gave his word, I trusted him. I smiled faintly. That was why he rarely gave his word.

CHAPTER

Eighteen

SERA

I blinked my eyes open. It was still dark and at first my surroundings were unfamiliar until I heard the crashing of waves. But I thought I heard someone curse. I came awake further and something in the darkness moved.

A shadow rose from the chair by the window. “It’s me.”

“What the fuck!” I shrieked, sitting up and staring at the dark shape approaching until Matteo took form.

The edge of the bed dipped. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“And your answer is to break into my room and watch me sleep? That’s creepy.”

His hand reached out and brushed the hair from my face. “You’re so pretty.”

“Can you even tell in this darkness?”

“Your image is seared into my brain.”

I leaned forward. He hadn’t been drinking. He smelled faintly of the woodsiness of his cologne and mint. “Is this the obsession curse that Liz is talking about?”

“Probably.”

“I was joking.”

“I’m not.”

His answers were clipped and short. Almost a fatalistic acceptance. “Come with me somewhere.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Let me get this straight. You want us to sneak out in the middle of the night?”

“It’s almost dawn.”

“All right. But I thought we were supposed to stay inside the compound.”

“We’re not prisoners here, Sera. I’m not risking you.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I thought the security was overkill unless he was hiding something from me. Santino lost the element of surprise when he confronted us at the club. Now everyone was watching his movements and he’d be an idiot to make another move too soon.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess it’s too much to ask you to wait outside?”

He stood and kissed the top of my head. “I’ll put coffee in a thermos. Dress warm. There’s a chill in the air.”

Still baffled by my new boyfriend’s behavior, I checked the weather at this time. It was fifty-five degrees. I decided to put on a windbreaker under my jacket. If it was too warm, it was easy to shed.

I went to the living room and saw Matteo was dressed in jeans, a dark Henley, and a leather jacket. He glanced up from where he was packing a cooler.

“Are we going to picnic at dawn?”

He grinned. “I want to be prepared. Don’t want you hungry. No croissant though.”

“I’m not that high maintenance.”

He held the cooler and the thermos in one hand, and with the other, he walked up to me and linked our fingers.

I looked at him in mock suspicion. “What are you up to, Matteo De Lucci?”

“Just trust me.”

Instead of the Jaguar, we took one of the SUVs. I didn’t realize the compound had a back entrance. When we exited it, a guy from Ronan’s crew waved us through the gate. The Suburban navigated a narrow gravelly road. I realized why we couldn’t use his Jaguar.

I wasn’t sure if the churning in my gut was from anxiety, excitement, or my rude awakening this morning. Matteo lowered the windows to let the sounds of the early morning in.

Both sides of the road were thick with trees, and more than once, they reflected nocturnal eyes of creatures of the night.

“Are you telling me where we’re going?”

“Nope.” Matteo glanced at me briefly. “Am I making you nervous?”

“Not in a serial killer kind of way even though you did watch me sleep like a stalker.”

“I’m growing on you.”

I laughed lightly. “Maybe. Okay, unless you tell me how many more minutes, I don’t think I can delay my patience enough not to touch the coffee.”

“We’re here,” he said as the vehicle turned into a clearing.

Dawn light was teasing the horizon, but the stars still twinkled. It was gorgeous. Magical.

“Oh my God, Matteo,” I whispered, finally realizing what he was doing. “Are we going to watch the sunrise?”

He didn’t say anything, but made an amused sound at the back of his throat.

The SUV circled the area before backing up so the tailgate was pointed toward the ocean.

We got out of the vehicle and he opened the back while I was impatient to start exploring where we were.

The waves crashed against the bottom of the cliff. I was stoked.

The aroma of coffee hit my nose and I welcomed the steaming mug Matteo offered to me.

Good man.

“It’s going to be another ten minutes to sunrise,” he told me. “We can sit at the back of the Suburban and you can tell me the rest of the St. Rita story.”

“I was sensitive yesterday. I shouldn’t have jumped down your throat, especially since you cared enough to ask me about it.”

“You’re forgiven, but it takes more than you biting my head off to hurt my feelings.”

“Then why did it look like I pissed you off?”

“You and I both know we were heading into dangerous territory about what we can and can’t say about our family. So, why don’t you finish the St. Rita story?”

“Where did I leave off?” My memory needed to wake up with more caffeine.

“She forgave her husband’s murderers.”

“Oh, right.” I was invigorated with my first sip of caffeine. The wind blew off the coast and there was a bite to it. Matteo opened his arms and I snuggled into the warmth of his embrace. So cozy. It felt so right. As though I was made for him.

“It was the husband’s brother who wanted revenge,” I said. “It seems vendetta has always been part of Italian history.”

“So did her brother-in-law go after the murderers?”

“No, but worse. He taught his nephews to want to avenge his brother.”

“What a fucking coward.”

I rubbed my cheek against the textured fabric of the Henley.

“So he perpetuated the feud instead of ending it. Did Rita’s sons go through with it?”

“No. She begged them not to, but they were already too far gone into vengeance mode. So she prayed to God to help them change their ways. It must have worked because her sons caught dysentery and died.”

“That’s sad, but I guess...”

He let it hang.

“It’s better than being murderers going to hell.” I shrugged, taking another sip of coffee. “I thought about what you said, and unless I’m in that situation, I wouldn’t know. All I know is I love my family.”

I pushed away from him and stared into his eyes, missing the fierce blueness of them. They were inky right now as dawn light turned the sky purple. “Let’s talk hypothetically.”

A flash of his smile made my stomach flip. Damn, since when did everything Matteo De Lucci do make me swoon? I used to be annoyed by him. I didn’t know when my swoons for Daniel transferred to him. Was I so contrary with my affections that they transfer so easily?

“If anyone hurt Luca, I would go with whatever the next Don of the family wanted as payback.”

“And if they wanted to call a truce instead?”

“I don’t know how I would feel. Is vengeance mine to take?”

“Are we talking philosophically here?” he asked. “Or spiritually?”

“See, that’s the whole thing and why I’m probably the most contradictory Catholic on the planet,” I argued.

Matteo gave a huff of laughter. “I think that can be said for most crime families.”

“Right?” I said. “I could never wrap my mind around the concept, but it was almost dogmatic. We know what our

family does..." I paused. "Okay, I'm not sure if it applies... but..."

"Let's just say hypothetically..." Matteo said. "I'm equally guilty of what you think I'm guilty of."

I had to compress my lips into a straight line and not laugh. We were trying to avoid spelling out exactly what we wanted to say. This was nothing new. I'd seen Luca talk to other families when they each wanted the other to do something illegal and the request was never direct but full of subtext.

Like, talk to Johnny, he's having issues.

Don't worry, I'll have a chat with him.

Chat really meant Johnny was going to be swimming with the fishes.

"Then we should think of something to save your soul," I said without thinking.

His grin faded. "Is that who you are, Sera?"

"I'm not sure what we're talking about right now."

"Trying to save your uncle's soul."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "Luca is religious, but he also knows he can't simply go to the confessional and make donations to cleanse his sins."

"My dad once told me the men who make it to the top of the mafia...it was in their blood and they couldn't help being a little criminal. They don't conform to the rules of normal society. They thrive in the underworld."

"Do you think it's in your blood to be a bit criminal?"

He shrugged. "I'll do whatever it takes to protect my family. And you, Sera? Do you think it's in your blood, too? Is that why you've clung to the life of Rita of Cassia to help your family atone?"

I looked at the horizon. "The sun is about to rise and I'm not trying to avoid the question, it's just too early for this conversation."

Another one of his sexy chuckles made my nipples sensitive. Or maybe it was the scratchy fabric of my sweater. I'd been too lazy to put on a bra this morning. After all, I had a rude awakening. I put my coffee down and made to jump off the vehicle, when Matteo lifted me out, letting my front slide against his until my feet touched the ground.

He held me briefly in a tight hug and let me go after planting a kiss on my forehead. His hand slipped into mine and we walked to the edge of the cliff.

I didn't know why I had a sudden flash of lovers walking out to meet the sunrise before plunging to their deaths.

Was that what Romeo and Juliet would have done if they were presented with this scenario?

And why was I thinking of Romeo and Juliet? Matteo's family and mine were not enemies.

The horizon gleamed golden as the first rays of the sun emerged from the edge of the water.

I didn't know why my heart pounded in anticipation.

Matteo hugged me from behind. I could feel the racing of his heart too.

"I want to tell you something..." he said in my ear.

I turned my face slightly and smiled. "You know that's the wrong thing to say when we're standing so close to the cliff."

He laughed lightly. "Have I ever told you I love talking to you?"

Stop making me fall for you, please. The ocean waves crashed beneath us, but a different tempest was rampaging inside me.

The sun rose higher.

"Dad brought Mom here to watch the sunrise whenever they came up for vacation," he said. "I think Renz brought Liz, too. Nico and I have never been."

My heart pounded. "Why haven't you come? This place is gorgeous."

“My parents connected this to the De Lucci myth of men becoming obsessed.”

I wasn't sure I was breathing. “And why now?”

“Nothing compelled me to bring any of my girlfriends up here.” He cleared his throat. “Until you, Sera.”

Oh my God, I didn't know what to say. This storm of emotions, this bubble of happiness, seemed to crack the final wall protecting my heart.

He turned me around so we were face to face. “If this is what obsession is, or the beginning of it, then I fully commit to its madness.”

Giddiness broke through the cracks of my walls.

“Say something.” His voice rasped with...need? Impatience? Our eyes searched each other. He swallowed, his throat visibly bobbing as though those words took a lot of effort to say. I'd never witnessed such naked uncertainty on Matteo's face. He was always self-assured.

“I don't know what you want me to say, Matteo,” I whispered. “Except I also feel something intense.” I put a hand over my heart. “I don't know how to explain it? I'm giddy and relieved?”

“Yes.” His gaze was intent on mine, still searching, and then a smile spread across his face. “I think I understand what you mean.”

We were both at a loss for words. Only the sun breaking from the horizon and bathing our faces with its golden rays broke our locked gazes. We turned to watch it briefly. Though the majestic scene awed me, the stronger pull was from the man beside me.

I turned to Matteo. He was watching me.

“You're missing the sunrise,” I teased.

His finger tilted up my chin. His expression was solemn.

And then he kissed me. The sun's rays burst around us, but it was like the same light burst out from my heart with the

kiss. A lightness, an acceptance of his obsession, an answer of a yearning in my own heart. An explanation of why all the small and big things this man did made my heart too big to contain inside me.

He was devouring my lips with a desperation that spoke of restraint and power. It made me just as desperate to get inside him.

When he lifted me up, my legs automatically wrapped around him. I tore my lips away, and he made an impatient sound at the back of his throat as he tried to recapture them.

“What about the sunrise?”

“We have many sunrises ahead of us,” he growled. “Fucking you can’t wait.”

Wet heat spasmed between my legs. Oh yeah. About damned time.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

MATTEO

I cursed the slowness of the SUV on the unpaved road. Our return to the compound tested my patience. I burned to get Sera naked. To make her mine.

The only reason I didn't speed and spin my wheels when the Suburban barreled through the gates was because I didn't want to wake everyone up.

I parked and cut the engine. "Out."

I rounded quickly to her side and she was still lowering herself to the ground when I lifted her out and set her down. Grabbing her hand, I dragged her behind me.

"Matteo!" she whisper-yelled.

I slowed down because she was making too much noise trying to catch up with me.

I stopped and looked at her. "Do you need me to carry you?"

"No." She looked offended.

"Because in twenty seconds, baby, I want you naked with me buried inside you."

Without waiting for her to answer, I swept her up in my arms. She gave a little squeak but didn't say any more and burrowed her face into my chest. I stalked to the bedroom and slid her down my body before pinning her against the wall.

My lips slammed down, and our tongues dueled desperately. Sera tried to climb my body and it only fueled my own hunger.

Fuck yeah. She was as ravenous for me as I was for her. I tore my mouth away and yanked her sweater over her head and threw it on the floor. She helped shed my leather jacket and shirt. We were a tangle of arms because my hand closed in over her breast while she wanted to unzip my pants. Christ, the feel of her nipple against my palm was so fucking erotic. I lowered my head and captured one in my mouth. I nipped it lightly.

“Ahh!” she gasped.

So damn responsive.

I shoved my hand into her sweatpants and fingered her pussy. She was slick. I stroked her entrance and she coated my fingers. I dipped a finger into her and the suction made me groan.

“Wet,” I snarled. “This is going to be fast.”

I tore her sweatpants off along with her panties, thankful she’d already kicked off her shoes. Both of us went for my jeans, but I tapped her hand away because she was fumbling with it.

She was breathing hard.

I had problems catching my breath. Jeans unbuttoned, zipper lowered, I freed my cock. With one arm, I lifted her.

And slammed into her.

She gave a strangled moan, trying to keep quiet. I grunted into her ear.

“You’re...” she broke off. “Everywhere.”

My mouth was beside her ear. “And you feel so fucking good.”

So good because...fuck. Condom.

I clenched my jaw before hissing, “Sera, do you trust me?”

“You can move now,” she whispered.

“Sera,” I repeated. “I forgot the condom.”

Her whole body froze, but I didn't want to pull out. I pressed in deeper and ground against the top of her pubic bone. She was spasming around me. Fuck, I was in heaven and hell. I dropped my forehead to hers. “Trust me, please.” It was then I knew I was at a point of no return. This was not a mere obsession. I wanted her bare, needed her bare. Damn the consequences without an ounce of regret. How I was all in and I wanted Sera to be mine in every way.

She'd branded me and I didn't even know it, but I was building into this moment since the day I offered her a ride.

Her body relaxed. “Do it.”

Without hesitation, and with a lot of vigor, I slammed all the way in.

She wrapped around me tightly, darkness edging my vision before another blindingly delicious sensation gripped my balls when I withdrew to thrust back in.

I pounded into her fast and hard and she clung to me, meeting me thrust for thrust. Primal sounds bounced around the room as I bottomed out and stroked.

“I'm going to come inside you.”

Her eyes widened.

“You're mine, Sera.” I held off long enough.

“I...what does that mean?” she asked.

“You're sassing me, right?” I gritted. I was feral. This consuming force inside me was uncontrollable. Once I surrendered to it, the obsession took hold. Sera was not escaping.

I didn't give her a chance to answer. I ground my mouth against hers in a searing kiss before I detached us from the wall, backing toward the bed before flinging our connected bodies onto the mattress, then I withdrew my cock.

“I was coming again!” she cried.

“I need to taste you.” I fell between her legs. I spread them apart and dove right between where she was wet for me, digging my fingers into her thighs as I lapped up every drop like an addict dependent on her pussy for survival.

She moaned incoherently. I ate her harder. With my lips and my tongue and my teeth, I devoured her, and still, I hungered for more.

The wetter she got, the faster I stroked against her core.

“Too much.” Her fingers pulled at my hair. “It’s too much.”

Not enough.

“Stop, I can’t breathe.”

I looked up to see she was panting. I pressed kisses on the inside of her thighs, relenting to give her a breather.

“I want you inside me.”

“Soon.” I rubbed my nose in her scent while I let my stubble graze the tender skin at the apex of her thighs. I licked around her swollen clit. I wish I could see her come, but we have plenty of time. Right now, I want to deliver the best orgasms of her life. I fastened on her clit and sucked.

She went off like a rocket and her cry cut through the room, louder than anything since I had her up against the wall, and reminding me there were other people in the house. I’d become possessive with the sounds she made when she came. I didn’t want anyone hearing them except me.

Releasing her clit, I crawled up her body and slid back inside her.

Fuck. The grip of her was perfect.

She moaned loudly, and I put my hand over her mouth as I began to move. “Are you going to be quiet?”

She shook her head.

I narrowed my eyes and gauged her reaction. I continued to pump, hitting her sweet spot on the upstroke. She tilted her head up and the vibrations of her moan heated my palm.

I lifted my hand slightly.

“Put it back,” she whispered. “I want you to dominate me.”

Holy fuck. Have I discovered a kink? My cock hardened even more. I covered her mouth again and sped up my thrusts, pounding away at her pussy. Her hips squirmed.

“Wider, Sera.”

She obeyed beautifully and raised her knees as high as she could.

I gripped her under her ass to keep her still, one hand still over her mouth, and rammed into her repeatedly. The sounds she was making behind my palm turned me feral, primitive. This was domination. My property. I hammered “mine” into her over and over until finally, when she came, I let go of her mouth and swallowed her cry with an all-consuming kiss, still pumping furiously inside her.

When I couldn't hold back anymore, I planted myself to the hilt and came. Warmth coated my cock. I continued moving until I'd squeezed every drop inside her and slowed.

Logic and self-preservation rang alarm bells around me, but I had zero control over whatever the fuck this was. Sera was meant to be mine.

I rocked into her one last time before I pulled out and rolled on my back to stare up at the ceiling, trying to catch my breath at the same time letting the enormity of what I had done sink in.

She was still for a few seconds before she straightened her legs, then she started to get off the bed. I frowned, sat up, and snagged her around the waist. “Where are you going?”

“Back to my room.” Her voice was small, quiet, unsure.

Something was wrong.

I was still reeling from the force of my release, but I sure as fuck wasn't letting her out of sight, not after something as raw as the sex we just shared.

I rolled her onto her back and caged her in, searching her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure what to do after sex. Give you space?”

“Sera, why do you say that?”

“Well, you rolled off me...”

“You wiped me out,” I pointed out.

“Okay,” she said. “I don’t want to be needy.”

My brows drew together. “You’re far from needy. I want you to be needier.”

“Do you cuddle after sex?”

I exhaled. “Oh, baby. I would have reached for you and dragged you into my arms if you didn’t up and try to leave.”

“I—”

“I know. You don’t want to be needy, but I think we’re past holding back because I just came inside you. Bare.”

“I’m on birth control.”

Disappointment must have shown on my face, but I wasn’t expecting her next words.

“I’ve been tested recently. I’m clear.”

“I didn’t doubt you were.”

“Well, excuse me.” A flash of annoyance crossed her face. “I’m not virginal either.”

I laughed and rolled on my back, this time taking her with me. She struggled a little, but I held on tight. She didn’t struggle for long.

Token resistance.

Cute.

“When I asked you to trust me, we were on the same wavelength. I won’t risk you, baby. But for the record, I’ve never fucked another woman bare. Ever. I can’t explain it.” I

blew out a breath. “I haven’t even slept with a woman since...” I thought back, shit, since six months ago. “Before my last checkup. I’m clear too.”

“Wow, you’re paranoid,” she laughed.

“I’ve witnessed enough consequences that have ruined a life,” I said.

“And this morning you just didn’t worry about consequences?”

I looked down at her. “Not with you.” I sighed. “I think I finally understand Renz.”

“What’s the story there?”

I sighed again. “I don’t want to ruin the moment by rehashing that.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I’ll tell you, Sera, but not today.”

“Fair enough.”

I kissed the top of her head. “How about we take a nap, then I’ll feed you breakfast?”

CHAPTER

Twenty

SERA

After our nap, we went to breakfast at Bar Harbor followed by a walk along the wharf. Yachts and lobster boats rolled in as we walked hand in hand like a couple watching the lobstermen haggle with their processors.

The smell of the ocean wafted in the breeze. I felt like I was walking in a dream, in a picture-perfect fishing village. It was a warm day. The sky was a deep blue, and the sun was lower in the sky as we just passed the autumn equinox.

“Boothbay Harbor is three hours from here,” Matteo told me. “There are more things to see there and it gives the feeling of a coastal town. I’ll take you sometime.”

I didn’t know what to say. He was talking about the future and I kept reminding myself that we were in a real relationship and this wasn’t fake anymore. Any denial was extinguished the second I let him come inside me. Matteo was an unrelenting force. If he practiced the same mindset in business, I could see why he earned his moniker as a raptor. When he set his mind to acquire something, he did it with singular determination.

I wasn’t sure if that worked in my favor or against it.

The aroma of spun sugar overwhelmed the scent of seawater. Up ahead was a confectionary. I may have squealed like a child as I tugged Matteo toward the shop’s picture

windows. Through the glass, we saw people making fudge, but off to one corner sat the cotton candy machine.

An old ache pinched a corner of my heart. I hadn't had a cloud of sugar on a stick since I was a child. Since the time when I had a mom and a dad.

"Want one?" Matteo asked with amusement, but the amusement died in his eyes when he saw my face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I whispered. "It's just that...the last time I had cotton candy I was eight." I cocked my head as I confirmed with the memory that I was correct. "It was the year before my mother had a nervous breakdown." I blew out a breath. "And two years before I lost both of them."

I was staring through the glass mesmerized by the spun threads of sugar. But beyond it, I was seeing a young girl and her mother. I was seeing a mother laughing as her daughter tried to take a mouthful of sticky cotton candy.

It was a bittersweet memory.

"That's it. We're having one," Matteo rasped.

I didn't argue. I loved walking into confectionary shops, especially vintage ones such as these in small towns that elicited nostalgia and kept to the old ways of candy making. It made me think about how, sometimes, it was good to keep traditions.

We walked out with ginormous layers of spun strawberry silk. Matteo grabbed a handful and fed it to me. It was so messy. I did the same, but smashed it against his face. We laughed and kissed the sweet off each other. I even took a selfie of us and sent the image to Ivy. She texted me immediately, but I didn't want to interrupt this moment with Matteo. When the confection was half its size and more manageable, Matteo held the stick with one hand and wrapped an arm around me with the other while I embraced his torso with both of mine. Then leisurely, we traversed the boardwalk until we reached the end of the wharf.

We were silent for long minutes. I was finding peace in the vast ocean and the seagulls flying above. I had a feeling Matteo was giving me this time to remember my parents.

“It wasn’t all bad,” I told him finally. “Mamma was happy not knowing about what Papà did for the family.” I glanced up. “He was already being trained to take over for Nonno.”

Matteo nodded briefly and led me to one of the benches.

He held out the stick and I took a chunk of candy that was rapidly deteriorating from its puffy perfection. The sweetness somehow fortified my soul. Sugar did that to you, so now was as a good time as any to tell Matteo about a past I hardly remembered, but played a large part in shaping who I was today.

“It was the first attempt on his life that sent Mamma into a nervous breakdown.” Papà was ambushed in front of an Italian restaurant but his assassins were poor shots or that was how he told the story. He was grazed by a bullet and the soldiers with him were able to shoot back.

I gave a shake of my head. “Mamma was never the same. I was thankful Miss Rita was already with us, otherwise I didn’t know how I could’ve helped Mamma.”

“Didn’t they send her to a doctor?”

“Papà and Nonno decided it would look bad on the family if word got out she’d gone to see a psychiatrist.”

“You serious?” Matteo growled.

“Luca tried to argue with them, but he was only eighteen at that time.” I shrugged. “It’s always been frowned upon. They were probably afraid about what Mamma might reveal to someone outside the family.”

“Carlotta didn’t help?”

I sighed. “She tried. But there was little she could do from New York.”

He gripped my hand. “I’m sorry you had to go through that at such a young age. I can’t imagine how alone you must have felt.”

“You know what I feel guilty about sometimes?” I asked.

“Tell me,” he said gently.

I almost didn’t because I was rendered speechless with the compassion in his eyes. His eyes were a brilliant blue, but they warmed my soul. “I thought she was in a better place.”

“Oh, Sera.”

“We were assured they died quickly.”

“Car accident, right?”

I nodded. “Tampered brakes. She broke her neck and died instantly.”

Matteo gathered me in his arms. I didn’t cry. There was sadness. But I had been so young. I never experienced adolescence with a mom. When I had my period, it was Miss Rita who told me what to expect. She was the one who bought my feminine products. Mamma spent her days in bed and Papà grew more distant. It was Luca, of all people, who told me my father loved me but was just under so much pressure.

It all turned out to be bullshit.

Because when Papà was killed, the same pressure was applied to Luca and Ange. More so because there was competition. Yet Luca found ways to be an overbearing father figure/older brother and in a way, it showed someone cared for me. That was why I owed him so much.

“I’m sorry, Sera.”

“It’s all in the past,” I said. “Sometimes I think I was fortunate when Luca took over.”

“Heaven help us.”

It was two p.m. when we made our way back to the compound. Our convoy of bodyguards was ever present, but that was nothing new.

Matteo was on the phone with Nico, catching up with the goings-on in Manhattan.

I didn't have much time to process the shift of my relationship with him. My skin felt feverish whenever I got flashes of our steamy encounters. When we were having breakfast at the wharf restaurant, it'd been a struggle not to look at his mouth and not remember how those perfectly formed lips that were not too wide and not too thick, pouty yet firm, had been busy making me scream all morning. He was a god with that mouth, and a devil with that tongue.

We should have stayed home. I would have been happy to stay ensconced in the room, but Matteo was so anxious to do couple-y things, it made me laugh as well as made me swoon. I had only to look at my own family to see that money wasn't everything. Nonno, Luca, and Ange had been so busy running the organization, we rarely had family time. And that was probably why I never threw myself at Daniel because I saw his own ambition in business.

Matteo was different. I basked under his attention.

In just two days, I'd unburdened so much of my past to Matteo that none of my other boyfriends were privy to. Of course I couldn't just talk about murder and mayhem to people who hadn't grown up in the family. But a nagging feeling bloomed in my chest.

Matteo knew so much about me and made an effort as to what made me tick, but I knew next to nothing about him. I glanced over at my boyfriend who smiled at me while he continued to chat with his brother. I needed to start prying information out of him. I was curious about his relationship with Renz.

When we arrived at the compound, Matteo told me he needed to talk to Trevor, so I decided to check my phone.

Shit. Ivy. She'd left me several messages already. I was typing a message to her when my phone came to life with FaceTime. Fine. It was the least I owed her.

"Oh my God, you're alive."

"I texted you a picture of me and Matteo."

“You didn’t respond to my texts and calls. I thought he threw you into the ocean.”

I laughed. “As you can see, I’m in one piece.”

She pouted. “You left me a message yesterday saying you’re heading out of town. Then you ignored my calls.”

“My phone drained. I left it in the charger and on silent.”

“That’s convenient.”

“What? The picture this morning didn’t make up for it?”

“A little.”

“Where’s Daniel?”

“He flew to Chicago yesterday.”

“Chicago?”

“First shipment of olive oil coming in.” Her face came closer to the screen until it was distorted. “You look different.”

By the narrowing of her eyes and the mischievous gleam I spotted there, I knew what she was about to say.

“You got laid.”

“Oh my God.” I glanced over to where Matteo was still talking to Trevor. He must have felt my stare because he looked my way, the corners of his mouth lifting. I could feel my face heat up, so I walked around the house.

Ivy laughed. “Oh my goodness, Seraphina Moretti.” She backed away from the screen and put a palm to her cheeks. “You really look like you’d been sexed up hard.”

“Sexed up?”

“Fucked hard? Is that better.”

“Okay, before you hear it from anyone else,” I said. “Matteo and I are making a go for it. I mean...we’re a couple.”

“What...like he’s your official boyfriend?”

I nodded.

“When did this happen?” she asked. “You went on one date. And I don’t consider the breakfast, the soup kitchen, and the dance club a date. But damn, you guys did do the whole round of togetherness.”

“And we went away together, and on our drive he asked me about my bracelet.”

“You told him about your nanny?”

“Yes!” I was giddy about the whole thing again. It was a good feeling when someone listened to what mattered to you.

“Wow, that *is* impressive. Brownie points.”

“He took me to the best lobster shack in Maine.” I could barely contain my excitement in telling my best friend about this morning.

“Hmm, then he fucked your brains out.”

“No,” I said. “So, he woke me up before dawn.” I left out the part about him staring at me while I slept. “Then he took me to a cliff where you can watch the sunrise. It was glorious.”

“Get out,” she said disbelievingly. “You’re making that up.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Sera, somehow I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe it.” I left out the part about the obsession too. “We also walked along the wharf.” I sighed. “He bought me cotton candy, and then hugged me while I told him about Mamma and Papà.

“Aw...but...” Her eyes narrowed. “You left out the good part.”

Precisely. Things were happening too fast between Matteo and me, it was making my head spin. The first night he took me home after the gala, I’d been too wrapped up in Daniel to identify my attraction to him. Even now, I had trouble processing our relationship.

Ivy was going to ask details. Unless alcohol was involved, I doubted I'd ever be ready to share how skilled Matteo was with his tongue and cock. I was selfish. I wanted to keep the intimate details about him to myself and I was okay with that.

"I'm not ready to share yet."

"Fine," she groused.

Matteo finished his conversation with Trevor, so I ended mine with Ivy before she found a way to make me confess.



Matteo

"Oh my God, Matteo. Right there."

In the shower, I had Sera's leg draped over my shoulder and my mouth was on her pussy, taking my fill of her. Sera and I had retired early to our room, and I'd been making love to her ever since. We did take a break to sneak into the kitchen for food and to throw the bedsheets in the washer. Trevor and the rest of the crew had been instructed not to enter the house. My friend smirked and knew exactly what we were up to.

The shower was a great place to continue the different ways I envisioned having her. I loved the feel of her fingers digging into my skull, alternately pushing and pulling me toward her core.

I made her come one more time and rose to my feet. I traced her mouth. "I can take you here, but I've been dying for these lips to be wrapped around my cock."

She grinned. "Then we better hurry."

After rinsing off and toweling dry, we kissed our way into the bedroom. It was as if we had to have a part of us always connected. I backed us against the bed, but she surprised me when she shoved my chest.

I played along and fell on my back.

“Headboard,” she ordered. “You’re at my mercy, Matteo De Lucci.”

I elbow-crawled backward until I was sitting against the headboard.

Sera climbed on the bed, her hair a mass of wet curls framing her face. Her tits were full and hypnotizing as she crawled on all fours.

This had to be paradise.

I was already hard. My erection was happily pointing up. I spread my legs and Sera moved right between.

She licked her lips. “You have a beautiful cock, De Lucci.”

“All yours, baby.”

She dipped her head and swirled her tongue around the tip.

I hissed and gritted my teeth.

She was teasing me like I had done to her. Fair is fair.

With our gazes locked, I watched my cock disappear into her mouth. I could’ve come right there. My arm reached out, fingers threading through her hair before I fell back as I struggled to keep from coming too quickly. “Fuck.”

Then I lost her eyes when her hand joined her mouth and together they worked in perfect symphony to make me lose my damn mind. The pressure was building. Just watching her take me in, her cheeks hollowing out in suction and her lips all wrapped around my cock was seared into my brain. She made a sound at the back of her throat, a vibration I felt from the tip of my cock to the base of my spine.

The rising pleasure was subliminal.

I shuddered. I was getting close.

She went faster and faster. I was about to come. “Sera... Off... Now.”

She ignored me.

“Last chance,” I growled.

She still didn’t stop and her hand gripped me tighter.

I collapsed against the headboard and exploded into the back of her mouth. My release completely stole me of words, I could only grunt my approval.

And she continued sucking and lapping up every last drop of me. Even when I controlled her head movements, I felt my surrender. I was all in, yet somewhere in my subconscious, a warning blared.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

SERA

“I’m not sure I want to go back,” I groaned.

Matteo hauled my suitcase into the trunk of the Jaguar. Two weeks had passed since our arrival in Maine. The high alert had been lowered after the Galluzo agreed to put a leash on Santino, so our guards were relaxed. Trevor and the rest of his crew remained for a few more days before returning to Manhattan.

Matteo and I stayed on.

“We’ll come back and you can have your fill of lobster rolls.” He straightened and slammed the hood of the vehicle.

“There’s a good one in Manhattan,” I said. “It’s the place and the view.”

I waltzed over to him and linked my fingers around his neck. I barely could reach it since I was in flats. “You’re such a wonderful boyfriend. Thank you for taking me whale watching yesterday even if you’ve done it a gazillion times with your sister.”

“Hey, if I can pamper Bianca, I can pamper you.”

“Aw.” I beamed. “You’re so sweet.”

He lowered his head and kissed me. “But we need to leave.”

He was not wrong. We'd been summoned by both sides of the family. Luca wouldn't tell me what it was all about.

We were on I-95 when the phone on his dash rang.

"Dad," Matteo said. "You're on speaker."

"Hi, Mr. De Lucci."

His parents, Bianca, and Aunt Carlotta arrived from Italy the other day. So much for bliss. Reality was about to hit us in the face.

"Hi, Sera." I detected a strain in his father's voice. Shit.

"We just got on the road an hour ago," Matteo told him.

"Sera, do you know what time Luca is arriving?"

"He won't be in until later tonight," I said.

"I thought I'd let you know, Gustavo is here."

"What?" Matteo barked. "Why?"

"He's not saying. According to Luca, he doesn't know either."

"Gotcha," Matteo clipped. "Anything else?"

There was a pause and then, "We'll discuss later."

Matteo ended the call. A muscle pulsed in his jaw, while his knuckles whitened against the steering wheel. Finally, he said, "I hate this."

"Me too," I whispered.

"Sera." His voice was controlled. "I want you to know, whatever happens, I want to be with you."

"I know," I said with conviction.

"You also know what this meeting is all about, right? What our family expects. That we see this through to marriage."

"I wonder if that's why Zio Gus is here." As godfather, maybe he was going to give advice.

Matteo's reply was a terse, "Yes."

The Jaguar started moving. He kept his eyes forward while I stared outside my window. Each landmark that we passed, and each mile that erased our distance from Manhattan, felt like a march to the gallows.

“This is not what I should be feeling,” I said after twenty minutes of silence. “Do you even want to get married?”

“Do you?”

“I asked you first.”

“Not this way,” he said.

“Like we’re being forced.”

“Yes.”

I was staring at him now. The strong column of his throat bobbed and he grabbed his travel mug of coffee and took a sip. “This was not how I wanted to tell you about how I was feeling.”

My heart pounded. “Tell me anyway.”

“I’m obsessed with you. I’m fairly certain...I’m falling in love with you.” He slapped the steering wheel with his palm. “This wasn’t the way I wanted to tell you, dammit.”

A relieved breath gusted past my lips, a lightening of the weight in my chest. “I’m fairly certain I’m falling in love with you too.”

He glanced at me briefly, a rueful smile on his lips. “I thought I had more time. I should have told you when we were in the middle of the ocean yesterday, but I didn’t want to compete with the excitement of the whales.”

I laughed. Matteo was cute when he thought he fumbled in his attempts of trying to be a perfect boyfriend. I never told him that though. One would just look at him, and “cute” was never a word to describe him. He made me feel things. I didn’t want to label them yet. I had built myself to deny a forever love because of my future in an arranged marriage. I dared not hope that I would marry for love instead of duty. This should have been perfect. So why wasn’t I giddy with joy?

Because love and duty were oxymorons. Because one tainted the other.

“I guess, as long as we know...”

“I don’t want people telling us what to do,” he growled.

“I think it’s too late for that. Luca is on his way to New York. If someone spots him, our engagement will be splashed on Page Six by midnight even if we say no.”

“Are you going to say no, Sera?”

“What?”

“Are you going to do as your uncle commands?”

“He cannot command me to do anything.”

I was baffled by his sudden change in tone.

“Let’s just say fuck you to all of them,” he said.

“That’s an idea. How?”

“Let’s elope in Vegas.”



“Are you out of your mind?” I screeched. “How is that the solution?”

He grabbed my hand and kissed it. “Hold that thought. This is not a conversation to be had in the car.”

“A proposal is not to be tossed out while driving in the first place,” I retorted. “Way to burst my bubble with that proposal.”

“It was a suggestion. Not a proposal.”

I yanked my hand from his. “Well, sorry to misunderstand, but weren’t you asking me to marry you in Vegas?”

He glowered at me before returning his eyes to the road. “Look, in ideal circumstances...”

I gave him the hand. “Don’t talk to me.”

“God, you’re a pain in the ass.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m not marrying you.”

“Oh, you will.”

“Oh my God, stop. Now you’re making me a forgone conclusion.”

And then he had to do that sexy chuckle that made me want to melt into his leather seats.

“Don’t do that.”

He gave a disbelieving sound. “I’m not allowed to laugh now?”

I did a circling motion with my finger. “That thing you do with that deep rumbling chuckle makes me forget that I’m mad at you. So don’t do it.”

He did it again, and then said, “Hmm...”

“Hmm what?”

“You find it sexy?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, but it explains why your eyes flash with heat whenever I chuckle that way.”

Shit.

I looked out the window.

Ten minutes later, we were taking an exit to the rest area.

“I sure hope this is not where you plan on proposing.”

“The proposal has been rescinded.”

My mouth gaped, but I was more outraged than hurt because Matteo was grinning. The man was up to something. Well, I wasn’t stepping out of this car, and I was childishly going to put my hands over my ears if he even attempted another one of his proposals.

He coasted into a space and grabbed his phone off the dash. “You can use the ladies’ room if you want.”

Matteo exited the Jaguar. To take my mind off my boyfriend's weird behavior, I dug my phone out of my purse. I wanted to call Ivy and complain about Matteo, but my friend would hold out advice until I filled her in about all the sex I'd been having with him. She said she was having a dry spell, and therefore, she wanted to live vicariously through me. Incidentally, she mailed a box of clothes to Maine which Matteo insisted on paying for. We did an "Away in Maine" segment for Donateka. Instead of calling her, I brought up her Pixygram. And there we were. Oh my God, I looked so happy in the video and pictures. Matteo and I flew a kite on the beach and the smile on our faces...we weren't faking it. And when he took the selfie of us staring into each other's eyes, there was no mistaking the expression on both our faces.

Love. We adored each other.

Matteo was still talking on the phone. He tried as much as possible not to hide conversations from me, and I never held it against him when he did.

Marriage made a lot of sense.

Our feelings were influx. We were hitting that dopamine high of love. If I had to choose to marry for convenience and Matteo was an option, it was a no-brainer.

I would say yes.

When he returned to the vehicle, I kept that epiphany to myself. I was still pissed at him for suggesting Vegas out of the blue, as if we hadn't spent an idyllic two weeks in Maine.

I was a needy girlfriend apparently.

"You didn't use the restroom?" he asked, sliding behind the wheel.

"I'm fine, and if I need to go, I can just ask you to take the next exit."

He raised a brow. "I'm anxious to get to New York."

"Anxious to face the firing squad?"

His brows furrowed. "Is marriage to me that unpalatable?"

“Maybe I’m finding you unpalatable at the moment.” *Oh, God, make me shut up.* Since when had I become this petty? I didn’t do petty. Well, classy petty maybe but this was bitchy petty.

When we were back on the highway, I said, “I’m sorry. No, I didn’t want to go. I can hold it until lunchtime.”

“You’re forgiven. It’s been a crazy past few days.”

I side-eyed him. “Who did you talk to?”

“Two calls. Nico and Liz.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Yeah. Just wanted an opinion for a lunch stopover.” The way he tossed me his charming gaze made me suspicious.

“Did you have to step out of the vehicle to do that?”

“No. But I had other things to discuss with Nico.” His tone turned serious, evasive even.

An instinct that he was withholding something important formed a knot of anxiety in my gut. Our relationship was at a point where something had to give. This was why many arranged marriages in the mafia had short engagements. The uncertainty of loyalties made everyone nervous. I’d only picked up bits and pieces and I’d concluded this: Matteo might not be directly involved in the De Lucci crime family, but he was a huge player in a sub-culture of the underworld. That he could request protection from the don so quickly and without question, not to mention Luca not having an argument about my security, spoke to the branch of power that originated from Matteo’s father.

I thought about the expectations Matteo was facing as the oldest son. From what I’d learned about Cesar De Lucci, Matteo had big shoes to fill. His father was well-respected in business circles and feared in the underworld. No one dared to cross him. Of course there were outliers like the Galluzo. Chicago was neutral when it came to that organization. A long time ago, Carlotta, who was the most sought-after mafia princess at that time, chose a De Lucci instead of one of the

Galluzo capos, Gustavo included. If I married Matteo, that would be a double slap to the Galluzo.

My duty to my family and the one I'd prepared for myself all my life flashed before me. It was better than I'd expected, which brought me back to my epiphany that Matteo was perfect for me.

“Where are we stopping?” I asked.

“It's a surprise.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

SERA

“You’re taking me to a winery?” I straightened in my seat when he took the exit and I saw the sign.

“Best one near Boston,” he said. “They have outdoor seating. It’s a beautiful day.”

“It’s a gorgeous day.” I didn’t know why, but tears prickled my eyes. I sniffed.

His fingers tipped my chin up. “Hey.”

“Watch the road,” I mumbled.

The Jaguar idled at the crossroads before making a right turn.

“I am. What’s wrong, Sera?”

I exhaled heavily. “You always try to make things special.”

“Does that mean I’m forgiven for suggesting an elopement in Vegas?” There was humor in his voice, but uncertainty too.

“Yes. You rescinded the proposal anyway.”

“You did throw it in my face.”

I buckled up my emotions and shot him a watery smile. He grinned at me and I didn’t say anymore. Neither did he. But deep down inside butterfly wings were rioting.

Turning my attention to the bucolic setting, I marveled at the fields of grapes that surrounded us. When I lived in Napa, harvest was my favorite time of the year. The grapes would be heavy on the boughs, a beautiful landscape of green and purple. The whole valley would be electrified with excitement while anxious winemakers kept an eye on the weather, which might force them to gather the grapes before they reached full potential or risk losing the entire crop. Optimum stage for picking depended on taste, but some did rely on a backup method like the refractometer that would measure the grape sugar.

Tradition versus technology was something that always fascinated me.

Matteo parked the Jaguar in front of the vineyard's restaurant. "Don't move. I'll come get you."

I lowered the visor and quickly checked my face, grimacing at the splotchiness and my lack of makeup. When he opened the door, he held out his hand with a flourish. "My lady."

"This is very romantic, Mr. De Lucci." I accepted his hand and stepped out of the car. "But I'm not dressed for it."

He closed the door and put both hands on my shoulders, giving them a squeeze. "You're gorgeous. Don't you know naked is the best look on you?"

I gave an eye roll as he laughingly kissed my forehead. "Come on. Let's put some food in you."

At the hostess podium, Matteo gave his name. Apparently, we already had reservations.

"So, who suggested this place?" I asked.

"Liz."

"Oh, it's really nice."

"It's harvest time. They're usually crowded, but they had a lunch opening and it's a weekday."

The hostess led us into a backyard setting called the vintner's knoll. There were picnic tables everywhere and I felt

better in my jeans and sneakers.

After the woman left us, I gushed. “This is so perfect.”

“I thought it’s a good mix of casual and classy.”

“It is.”

“It’s mostly finger foods though. Food that goes with wine.”

“This is perfect, Matteo.”

A small smile played on his lips. “I’m glad. Now...”

“I knew it.” I grinned because I had a gut feeling of what he was up to.

“You rejected me earlier, but as you can tell, I don’t give up easily.”

“I know.”

“I apologize for how I threw out Vegas earlier”—he blew out a breath—“but—”

“That’s the oldest sibling syndrome.”

He arched a brow. “At any time during our relationship have I treated you like one of my siblings?”

“No, I’m just talking about your penchant for taking over.”

“I’m learning...and I’ve never forgotten what you told me the first time I took you home.”

I racked my brain. Finally it came to me and I giggled, but before I could repeat those words, Matteo beat me to it.

“You said, *Next time do better.*” He took my hand. “I’ll always do better for you, Sera, because better isn’t the best and I’ll always want the best for you.”

My mind scattered and I couldn’t think of the words to respond.

His eyes smoldered. “I don’t want to lie and say I love you because the word *love* doesn’t encompass everything I feel for you. *Obsession* doesn’t seem right either because it sounds selfish, like it’s all about me, and all about what I need.”

I continued staring at him.

“Say something,” he rasped. “Am I scaring you?”

“I’m not scared,” I whispered. “I’m anxious.”

His brows drew together. “Because we’re going too fast?”

“Yes.”

He looked past me and signaled with his finger, probably telling the server to come back later and not interrupt our conversation.

“Do you trust your feelings for me?”

“I think so.”

“Do you trust my feelings for you? That I care for you deeply? That we can learn love after marriage?”

“Matteo...” My breath hitched. “When I consigned myself to a fate of an arranged marriage, for my duty to family, I promised myself that I would learn to love my husband.”

He smiled. “Like St. Rita.”

I grinned back, happy that I didn’t have to explain the correlation. “Yes. But the truth is...with you? I don’t think it’s even a question that I will fall in love with you. After two weeks in Maine, I saw the promise of the husband you could become.” The back of my eyes stung.

“Then marry me,” he said fiercely. “I don’t have a ring. We don’t have time for that now. My family and yours will be waiting for us in New York. I don’t want our marriage to be influenced by our duty to them. I want you to be mine. Nico is on standby. Do you want to call Ivy to be our witness?”

“Oh my God.” My head was spinning. Things were happening too fast, but I was with Matteo. What we shared in the past two weeks shouldn’t be tainted by our duty to family. We had a chance to make it about us. About what we wanted.

“Because if not, Liz can take her place. But I know you want Ivy there.”

“I want her there,” I said quickly. “She’s busy, but it wouldn’t be right to do this without her.”

“I’m not sure if she and Nico can stand to be on the same plane.”

I huffed a laugh. “Probably not.”

“So, Sera Moretti, will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

SERA

“You may now kiss the bride.”

I turned to my newly minted husband. Matteo looked dashing in an Italian suit. He reeled me in, his mouth sealing over mine before his tongue demanded entry between my lips. We ignored our Elvis officiant, his assistant, and the other two people in the room, Nico and Ivy.

When he released me, I was breathless.

I'd been breathless since this morning when we ditched the family, headed straight to La Guardia, and flew to Vegas. Matteo had his brother bypass their private jet to avoid alerting any of the De Luccis, and we all traveled first class via commercial plane.

“Pictures!” Ivy yelled.

Matteo stiffened. And my friend rolled her eyes. “Not posting on Pixygram. Especially since Sera is not wearing any Donateka.”

“Just as well.”

Ivy wasn't pleased with the elopement and it had nothing to do with me not wearing their label. She thought I deserved more. More time. More wooing. Just everything more. I did assure her there would be a second wedding. One she could plan for me if she wanted. That appeased her a bit. And it

might come sooner given the nature of my family and his. When it came to weddings, no one skipped tradition.

We did the standard pose: my arm tucked into Matteo's elbow.

"This is beautiful. Oh my God, I take back what I said. You two are too gorgeous not to share. This is what social media is made for. Can I at least post it to my story?"

"Well..." I glanced up at Matteo.

His jaw hardened. "Fine."

Nico butted in, "Just leave me out of it."

Ivy glared at him. "I wouldn't want to pollute my brand."

Nico clenched his jaw and hung back while Ivy resumed her post-wedding coverage.

These two.

Matteo was adamant not to put our Elvis wedding on social media, but when Ivy was not her cool, collected self, she was tenacious and hard to deny. Besides, I think Matteo's pushback had more to do with his jealousy of Daniel, and since I wasn't wearing anything related to Donateka, he just needed a little nudge to give in.

After a few more pictures, we got into the limo and headed to dinner.

"I'm starving," I told Matteo.

"Here, let's pop the champagne," Nico said.

"Matteo..." Ivy looked up from her phone. "I think your sister just followed me."

He chuckled and slid out his phone. "Are we ready to face the messages and calls?"

Ivy handed me mine which I'd set on airplane mode since our flight out of La Guardia.

"What exactly did you tell everyone?" I asked Nico.

"Not to expect us for dinner."

We all laughed, although mine was starting to edge closer to hysteria than excitement.

Since the moment we arrived in Vegas, it had been a blur. Ivy and I went wedding dress hunting. Not a gown, but more of a short skirt with a long train. I was thrilled with the offerings of the shops Ivy had googled on the plane. This was one place where Donateka didn't have a boutique, and I could feel my friend's brain speculating.

The guys went to an Italian boutique they patronized and spent no time at all selecting their suits.

"Well, are you going to just stare at your phone because I'm getting messages from Luca, and Bianca just DM'd me," Ivy said, then laughed. "Oops, Daniel too. How had we forgotten about my brother?"

"Maybe because he's out of the country," I pointed out.

"Just as well," Matteo muttered.

I squeezed our clasped hands. "We're married now. No need to be jealous." I couldn't help teasing. He was such a pain in the ass whenever Daniel was mentioned.

Apparently, my best friend had a similar imp in her. "At least I won't be hearing Sera whining that we should be sisters-in-law anymore."

"Ouch, Poison Ivy," Nico drawled. "That's below the belt."

"Is that so?" my husband said. Husband. I turned the word over in my head. I still couldn't believe it. "I tease Ivy about it. I was never serious. You know how my situation was. Besides ___"

"Let's not talk about it," he cut in.

"Good idea," I retorted and then glared at my best friend.

"What?" she said, eyes widening. "Maybe we had too much champagne before the ceremony."

"Yeah, blame the alcohol," Nico muttered and handed flutes of bubbly to Matteo and me.

“Apparently it doesn’t have any effect on you. You’re still an ass,” Ivy snapped. She glanced at the flute in Nico’s hand, she noted, “And rude.” She grabbed the champagne out of his hands. “Give me that.”

The drink sloshed over their hands. “Watch it!”

They glowered at each other.

Hmm...if I didn’t dread it, I would say my best friend and Nico had serious chemistry. I was going to get her back for teasing me when I noticed Matteo was leaning back against the seat, his head thrown back, eyes closed.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “We can just skip dinner and go to our suite. Order room service.”

“I’m fine.” He straightened and gave me a tight smile. “Just a bit tired. Hungry too. I’m sure I’ll feel reinvigorated after dinner.” He waggled his brows. “I’m not going to fail you on our wedding night.”

“Are you sure you two don’t want to have a romantic dinner all by yourselves?” Ivy looked at me, then at Matteo.

“Weddings are meant to be celebrated with family,” I insisted.

“Sera is right.” He put an arm around me and drew me close. “We’ll have all the romantic dinners on our honeymoon.”

I laughed. “I don’t even know where we’re going. Are you going to surprise me?”

Before he could reply, both our phones blasted with alerts.



Matteo

“Carlotta, I promise...” Sera was shaking her head. “Matteo and I will have a church ceremony and you and Ivy can plan it if you want.”

It was a good thing we were in a private room. The phone calls had been nonstop. Dad had been amused, but Mom and the McGrath family were appalled I eloped with Sera. As for Luca, he sent me a brief one: “We’ll talk about the disrespect when you come back.”

“How about we don’t, fucker.” I didn’t type that back. His response and everyone else’s only solidified my sentiment that Sera and I did the right thing.

I glanced up to see Nico and Ivy stiffly eating beside each other. Surprisingly, these two hadn’t killed each other yet. My brother had the tendency to rub Sera’s friend the wrong way. Nico was being Nico. Their personalities didn’t mesh well. My brother had less patience for the frivolous than I did and we looked at social media the same way. A time suck. But we grudgingly accepted it from a marketing standpoint. I was growing used to it because it made Sera happy to indulge Ivy.

And what made my wife happy made me happy.

I looked at the two in front of me again, half amused, half resigned.

Maybe like aggressive dogs they just needed more socialization with each other.

But, first of all, Nico needed to stop with the fucking nicknames.

My phone flashed.

Bianca.

“We’ll never finish dinner,” I muttered and answered the call. “Hey, *smurfette*.”

“Don’t ‘hey, smurfette’ me,” she snapped. Her voice was hoarse as though she was crying.

“Aren’t you going to—”

“How dare you get married without your only sister!”

I swore under my breath.

“There’ll be another—”

“First Renz, and now you. Renz, I understood the circumstances, but you?”

“I think there are things you don’t understand.”

She sniffed. “But congratulations. I saw the pictures. Sera is gorgeous.”

“Hey, how about me, the handsome brother?”

“You looked okay.”

I chuckled.

“Can I talk to my sister-in-law?”

I looked over to Sera who was just finishing up the call with Carlotta. I mouthed, “Bianca.”

She smiled shyly and nodded.

I looked at my congealed pasta Alfredo and sighed. At least it was the appetizer portion. I was still starving and starting to get grouchy. I guessed my wife was rubbing off on me.

“Thank you again.” Sera ended the call with my sister. She was about to hand me the phone when Nico snatched it.

“Give me that,” he grumbled. “Yours too.”

Sera promptly surrendered our devices and Nico switched them to silent.

“Let’s fucking eat,” he said.

Amen.

After the barrage of phone calls, dinner went more smoothly. It was two a.m. when we rolled back to the hotel—a De Lucci property. The limo dropped us off at the entrance. I helped Sera from the vehicle and we walked into the hotel’s grand atrium.

Food and wine definitely put me in a better mood, and I’d been anxious to get my wife naked. Honestly, I thought I wouldn’t be able to perform my husbandly duties because

exhaustion hit me in the limo on our way to dinner. With the situation developing between our families, plus the added complication of Gustavo, the seven-hour drive followed by our flight to Vegas made it the longest damn day of my life. Nico and Jonas had been more than capable of handling the company while I'd been away. And it wasn't like I hadn't touched base during that time, but the weight of everything I'd forsaken to be with Sera descended on my shoulders.

I was reminded of my responsibilities.

Of taking over from Dad.

Gustavo became a landmine and, like Luca, he'd seen this elopement as an insult.

Still, I had no regrets.

Sera and I wanted to seize the moment, and we'd had those precious few hours when the world needed nothing from us. We had each other.

I was so preoccupied with the buzzing of my thoughts, I didn't notice the man sitting on the couch in front of the check-in desk until he was on his feet. With his disheveled appearance, I would have clocked him as a gambler who'd lost a fortune in the casino, but he looked familiar.

Nico, who had come in behind us, shouted, "Matteo!"

The man had pulled a gun and pointed it at me and Sera.

My wife tried to get in front of me, but I instinctively spun her away from the threat.

I saw the terror in her eyes before gunfire exploded and a force hit my back and pitched us to the floor.

Commence mayhem.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

SERA

Matteo and I crashed onto the marble flooring. My butt took the brunt of the fall and his body landing on mine stole the oxygen from my lungs. Dazed, I tried to make sense of the chaos erupting through the lobby, but I couldn't. My husband was on top of me, his biceps braced on either side of my face with his hands covering the top of my head.

His fierce eyes pierced into mine.

"Matteo," I whispered.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he growled savagely. He yelled something at Nico.

Screams and the stampede of feet echoed in my ears.

Matteo eased off me slightly, but the tension roiling in his body radiated into mine.

His breath serrated.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He didn't respond but called out above my head. "Are we clear?"

"Clear," Nico and one other guy responded.

Matteo's weight lifted off me, but instead of getting up, he rolled to my side on his back and groaned, "Motherfucker."

His shoulders partially rose so he could peer down his torso before his whole body collapsed and he groaned again.

“No.” Fear strangled my cry. I scrambled to my knees, my hands not sure where to touch. “Were you hit?”

His eyes were squeezed shut as he gritted his teeth. “Stomach.”

I ripped open his suit and the vest. Blood was rapidly seeping through his white dress shirt. A map of red.

“Flesh wound,” he grunted.

“This is no flesh wound,” I cried, glancing over my shoulder. “Nico!”

His brother crashed to his knees beside us. “Ambulance is on the way.”

This was surreal. Someone produced a towel and Nico put pressure on the area.

“Son of a bitch,” Matteo gritted, squeezing his eyes shut.

I’d never been more helpless in my life. All I could do was hold on to his hand.

“I think it went through,” Nico said.

Matteo emitted a rough chuckle, finally opening his eyes to look at me. Pain glazed in them. “Sorry for the fucked-up wedding night.”

Tears scalded my eyes. “I don’t care about the wedding night. I just want you to be okay.”

He attempted a smile, but a wave of pain must have hit him because his mouth flattened. When he was finally able to speak, he asked, “Galluzo?”

Nico shook his head. “Santiago.”

“Shit.” Matteo winced. This time it didn’t seem to be from the pain. I continued to grip his hand. I’d retreated into my head, praying, blocking out the noise around us.

Please let him be okay. Let him be okay. Please. I’ll give up anything.

Cursing and spewed hatred sliced through the vacuum of my thoughts. The man who shot my husband was getting hauled away by hotel security. “I hope you die, motherfucker. I’ll bury your entire family and spit on your graves.”

A chill went through my spine, not because I was afraid of him, but because my eyes fixated on the holstered gun belted around the waist of the hotel security guard watching over us.

The urge to seize the weapon and shoot the man who hurt my husband was overwhelming.

I guessed I wasn’t as forgiving as St. Rita after all.



Sera

“Here.” Ivy handed me a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

I wouldn’t leave Matteo’s side. After going through six hours of surgery, he was finally out of the recovery room and in a private one. The bullet went through on his right side and lacerated part of his liver. It did not hit any arteries.

De Lucci security was tight. Nico transformed from businessman to underworld boss. Gone was the lazy broodiness and in its place was grim proficiency. I’d caught whispers of conversations around me. I guessed because I was now Matteo’s wife, they could speak freely. They were still careful when Ivy was around. My friend sensed this and did what she could to let them do their jobs while making sure I was comfortable. She brought me a change of clothes, so I could put away my blood-soaked wedding ensemble.

I wondered if we were being punished because we had defied family.

What happened had nothing to do with the Galluzo or our recent troubles with them. I had a feeling it had something to do with the business that involved Ronan and the fringe organization that operated outside the mafia.

I heard Luca talking about this mythical group. One who wasn't tangential to organized crime, but rose above it. It was whispered about in the underworld. No one confirming or denying.

Before I married Matteo, I didn't have the right to ask him about the rumor. My eyes took in his sleeping form, his ashen face. I'd never seen him so still. I wasn't going to be my mother. There would be no secrets between me and Matteo. I needed to know everything that would put my husband in danger.

If I had any doubt that I loved Matteo, I was clear about my feelings for him now. Why else would I throw myself in front of him? Why else would I shield his body with mine? But it was he who put himself between danger and me. Did that mean he loved me too?

"You'll need that." Ivy broke through my thoughts, nodding at the cup in my hand. "I heard from Nico. His family has landed."

That meant Luca was with them. My uncle had been frantic when I spoke to him right after the shooting. He wanted to evacuate me from Vegas. I had to remind him that my place was with my husband.

The doctor said the next twenty-four hours were crucial to monitor for infection and other complications from the surgery.

A groan from the bed called our attention. Matteo stirred. I sprang to his bedside. He'd been awakened earlier but had been extremely groggy from the anesthesia. They pumped him full of painkillers too.

His eyes opened. Barely.

My fingers curled into his. His grip tightened.

"Next time..." He spoke with difficulty. "My wife...does not put herself," he hissed in a ragged breath. "In front of a bullet."

"That's the first thing you say to me?" I cried softly.

“Yes,” he gritted. “We will have words later, baby.” His jaw clenched when he tried to move.

“Stop. You’re going to tear your stitches. What do you need?”

“Thirsty.”

“I’ll go get the nurse,” Ivy said.

We could have used the call button, but I had a feeling my friend wanted to give us privacy.

After a couple of ice chips, his eyes became less hooded, but they were still glazed. He shifted in the bed, clearly uncomfortable.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I am. Don’t worry about me.”

“How can you say that?”

I noticed a sheen of sweat on his forehead.

“First night.” He coughed and then a small groan crept up his throat. “As man and wife and you nearly got shot.”

“Maybe you should not speak,” I said.

He glared at me.

“Talking obviously gives you pain,” I said gently.

He grunted.

I lovingly swept the hair away from his face. He tried to avoid my hand, obviously annoyed at me. I sort of understood him. It was a big blow to his pride that he was laid up in the hospital, on our wedding night no less.

The nurse came in followed by the doctor. The bustle of diagnostics began with a very disgruntled male.

When the door opened to let Matteo’s parents in, I was struck by their sheer presence.

I'd heard about the beauty of Matteo's mother, Ava. Her effortless attire of jeans, sneakers, and a light jacket over a tee was an antithesis of what I expected of the wife of a powerful man, much less a De Lucci. The smattering of freckles on an otherwise unlined skin belied her fifty-two years. Her blue eyes were the exact color of Matteo's. She had her red hair in a ponytail.

Cesar De Lucci was the opposite of his wife. There was no mistaking where his sons inherited their height and stature. He was in a suit sans tie, but it didn't look wrinkled at all given the six-hour flight from Manhattan to Vegas.

Understandably, they were both concerned for their son. They gave me a brief nod. Ava squeezed my arm when she quickly passed by me to move behind the doctor who was examining Matteo.

"How's my son?" Cesar asked.

"Dad," Matteo mumbled. "Sera is—"

"There are too many people in the room." The doctor looked at me. "I'm sorry—"

"I'll go outside."

"Sera," Matteo growled. "Don't leave—"

But I was already exiting the room, closing the door gently. Maybe I was a coward. For the first time since we exchanged our vows, I felt like I didn't belong. Even if the gunman was after Matteo, he wouldn't have been in Vegas if I had never entered his life.

"Sera!"

I looked up to see a dear familiar figure in a charcoal-gray suit. As tall as Matteo and just as broad in the shoulders, Luca was as imposing as the De Luccis. He was talking to Nico and another young woman with dark hair that had auburn highlights.

Bianca?

I hadn't cried since Matteo had gotten shot. I tried to remain strong through his surgery. The floodgates opened at

the sight of my uncle.

I ran toward him.

Luca met me halfway and dragged me into his arms.

He cupped my face tightly. “You okay?”

“Yes.”

“I was telling Nico that it might be better if I took you home to Chicago.”

“What?” I shrieked. “I already told you. I’m a married woman.”

“And someone just gunned down your husband.”

“I’m not abandoning him.” My voice was shrill. “The duty of a wife is to take care of her husband.” And I love him.

I looked at Nico. “Do you think that too?”

“Hell no,” he growled. “And good luck stopping Matteo from coming after you.”

“I heard it was a gut shot,” Luca said in a tone I didn’t want to hear. There was enough anxiety rattling inside me, but that was my uncle. He didn’t spare feelings and spoke his mind.

“It’s not.” I wasn’t about to discuss my husband’s condition in public. It didn’t matter if De Lucci soldiers were everywhere. I was protective of Matteo’s privacy.

The tug of loyalty threatened to pull me apart, but mine was unequivocally with Matteo.

“Do you know how hard it is to take care of someone with that injury?”

“It didn’t damage anything vital,” Nico said, backing me up. “He shouldn’t tear his stitches, and if you take Sera away, Matteo is going to be a terrible patient.”

“I’ll help,” Bianca said, looking at me warily.

“Thank you.”

Luca didn't seem appeased. "De Lucci said he would take care of you. You nearly got shot."

"I wasn't the target."

I was losing patience with my uncle. He needed to dial down his protectiveness for me because I was standing in front of him without a scratch while my husband was missing part of his liver and not yet clear of complications.

"I don't know about the lax security."

"We're handling it," Nico clipped.

Before Luca and Nico devolved into a pissing contest, the door opened. Ava emerged with the doctor and nurse and thanked them.

"They're limiting visitors—" Ava started.

Disappointment settled in my gut. "I can wait—"

"Sweetie," Matteo's mom said. "You're his wife. It's your right to be in there. Besides—"

"Where's Sera?" Matteo's raspy voice demanded.

Ava rolled her eyes and looked over her shoulder. "I'm getting her." She shook her head at me. "You have to get used to these De Lucci men."

"Needy." Luca smiled with derision.

Ava narrowed her eyes at my uncle. "You probably wouldn't understand. Come, Sera."

"Mom," Bianca protested. "Can I see Matteo?"

Ava ducked her head in the hallway and looked in both directions. There was no question about what she was doing. "Come on." She motioned to her daughter. Obviously, their mom wasn't a stickler for rules. I heard somewhere the McGraths had a wild side coming from their grandfather who had been a mob enforcer back in the day.

Matteo was blocked from view by the massive physique of his father. They'd raised his bed so he was in a sitting position.

When my husband saw me, a relieved look fell over his worried face. Did he think I was leaving him?

“Sera, come here.” Matteo held out his hand. Cesar stepped aside, but between the two of them, I felt tiny. He clasped my hand, his grip surprisingly strong for someone who’d just come out of surgery. “Dad, Mom, my wife...Sera. And that over there is my sister, Bianca, in case you haven’t figured out the resemblance.”

Cesar grinned and drew me into a hug. “Wish it could have been under better circumstances. Welcome to the family.”

He turned me over to Ava who smiled at me but not before I noticed the tiredness around her eyes. She squeezed my face. “You’re so pretty.” She looked at her son. “You have good taste.”

Matteo said, “She’s amazing, period.”

Ava hugged me while shaking with laughter. She whispered in my ear, “You have him wrapped around your finger.”

When she let me go, I saw Bianca regarding me curiously. Not with hostility, not exactly welcoming either. It was the same look I gave people who I thought had my uncle’s confidence, but I hadn’t figured out if they were trustworthy yet by my standards.

“Bianca.” I gave her a tentative smile. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Interesting.” This time her face broke into a mischievous smile directed at her brother. “We haven’t heard about you until that famous restaurant date that sent Manhattan into a tizzy.”

“That’s exaggerated.”

“I told Dad we need to let you in on our secret,” Matteo said. His words slurred a bit, so I went to him and took hold of his hand again.

“That can wait.”

He raised his brow, his grin a bit loopy. Yep, time for visitors to go. “Is that so?”

His dad said, “You don’t look surprised?”

“Well, with as much secret conversations your son has had, I was sure something was up.” I shrugged. “It’s nothing new in our world.”

Cesar raised a brow. “My son chose well.”

“Of course I did.”

“I think Matteo needs his rest now,” I said.

“What did the doctor say?” Bianca asked.

“If there was a place in the gut that someone needed to be shot, through the liver is the way to go,” Cesar told his daughter. “It regenerates, as you know.” His jaw clenched. “I’m just glad it wasn’t a twenty-two.”

I was too. It was the preferred caliber of hitmen because of the damage it could do when it bounced inside the body. A larger caliber basically cauterized the flesh as it went through. This was something you learned growing up in the life.

“Sucks to be stuck here a few more days,” Matteo grumbled. It wasn’t often I saw this, but he was every bit a little boy who was told he couldn’t go out and play.

Ava approached the bed. “You know the drill. Check for infection. And like the doctor said, they want to make sure there isn’t going to be any inflammation in your stomach lining.”

Inhaling sharply, I couldn’t believe how lucky Matteo was. If it had passed through his intestines, the road to recovery would have been longer with the threat of sepsis.

“He needs his rest,” I said.

Matteo grinned faintly. “You all heard my wife.”



“What are you doing?”

Matteo was getting dressed. We were supposed to stay one more day in the hospital.

“It’s been four days,” he said tersely, wincing when he put on his suit jacket.

“I should have brought your clothes for tomorrow—tomorrow.” I crossed my arms.

He sat on the couch and scowled at his shoes.

“We are not leaving here, Matteo, and if you try to put on your shoes and you bust your stitches, I swear I’ll have them commit you for another week.”

He was looking pale again under his tan, and sweat beaded his upper lip.

De Lucci men made terrible patients. They weren’t babies, quite the opposite. And it would have been a blessing if he had a cold, but Matteo had a lacerated liver. It would take at least two weeks for him to be able to move and six weeks to resume normal activities.

He glared at me. “Help me put on my shoes.”

I glared at him.

He inhaled, and gritted his teeth, and started to bend forward.

“Stop,” I whisper-yelled and sank to my knees in front of him. Tears welled in my eyes.

“I have nightmares of you getting shot in the heart.” My voice cracked.

He stilled. His eyes searched mine. “You never told me this.”

“I didn’t want to make you feel as bad as it is.”

“Baby,” he whispered, raising his hand to cup my cheek. “Don’t ever hide these things from me.”

“Please stay another night,” I said. “For me?”

“Help me up,” he said.

I stood up and aided him to stand. He started shedding his jacket. Relief hit me and I couldn't help him remove it fast enough.

The door to our room opened and his parents walked in. Ava was holding a tray of steamed fish and vegetables from the De Lucci-owned hotel. Matteo was in for a very bland diet with no alcohol until a doctor could give him the all clear.

“Where are you going?” Ava shrieked at her son.

“Apparently, nowhere,” Matteo grouched.

Cesar's eyes crinkled at the corners and his mouth twitched.

Yes, I foresee a very aggravated male in the upcoming weeks, but I considered him agreeing to stay another day a victory.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

MATTEO

This was starting to get aggravating. With each passing day, people seemed to tiptoe around me more and more. I'd never been this idle in my life. Sera hid my laptop and Dad had instructed everyone in the office to ignore my calls and texts. I'd been sidelined as the head of De Lucci Transnational. Of course I was grouchy.

It had been ten days since the asshole shot me.

That was probably why Mom suggested a cozy gathering tonight and promised I wouldn't be consuming bland food anymore. Throw Mr. Grouch a bone and all.

Still no alcohol though.

Sitting on the daybed by the window in our room, I pretended to scroll through my phone. In reality I was watching my wife get ready for dinner.

We had moved to the De Lucci mansion on Staten Island. Nobody had lived here since my grandfather passed away five years ago. There were caretakers and housekeepers to maintain the grounds and the residence since it was the best place for a ball. The security had been updated recently.

Dad and Mom temporarily moved from their Manhattan row house to the east wing of the mansion. Meanwhile, Sera and I occupied the west wing. This was so they could help her out in managing my ass. I could see how Mom struggled to let

Sera make the decisions with regards to my care, offering advice and suggestions without being pushy. I knew it was difficult for my mother to hold back, but I was thankful. Now more than ever, we needed to make Sera feel like she is a part of the family.

In a perfect world, I'd still be scrolling through business news of the day and sipping scotch while waiting for my beautiful wife to get ready. Or maybe interrupt her preparation with a quickie. Damn, those thoughts were making me more miserable.

She was sitting in front of an antique vanity that belonged to my great-grandmother.

Sera smiled at my reflection while putting on an earring. "Do you need anything?"

I shook my head. Sometimes her solicitousness was cute and sometimes it downright irked me. The annoyance was more directed at myself than my wife. It was a *me* problem for feeling like a worthless husband so soon after I said my vows to cherish and protect her. Since I'd been off painkillers for two days, lacerated liver or not, my libido had come back full force. Not that I doubted I could get the job done, but Sera had been adamant we shouldn't put a strain on my body. I couldn't wait to get over this shit and fuck my wife properly.

It didn't help that I was sleeping beside her but was not allowed to make any sexual advances. That was under threat that she would bring in an extra bed and not sleep beside me at all. My only consolation was the satisfaction that she felt like she couldn't resist if I tried.

"If you don't stop staring at me, I'm going to burst into flames," she said with amusement.

"There's nothing else I can do, can I?" I responded dryly.

Sera got up and padded gracefully across the room like a ballerina. She moved between my legs and pressed a kiss on my mouth. My hand reached up and prevented her head from moving away, bringing her mouth to me again. I devoured her

lips. She made a tiny sound at the back of her throat that had a direct line to my dick.

I held her there until I was satisfied with the kiss. “There,” I said after tearing my lips away. I was hard as a rock. “That’s how you should kiss your husband.”

“It’s for your own good.” Her gaze dropped to my erection. “Now what are we going to do with that?”

“It could use a little loving.” And I could use two fingers of scotch to numb my blue balls.

She rolled her eyes and took a step back. “I need something,” she said.

I raised a brow. “I’m listening.”

She laughed.

Humor twitched the corners of my mouth. And just like that, I was feeling less irritated.

“I need you to help me put on my bracelet. The clasp is funky.”

She held out her arm and the bracelet. It took a bit of finagling, but I got the bracelet around her wrist. “The band needs a replacement.”

“I know,” she said. “Your mom said she could take it to a jeweler.” Her mouth turned down. “But it’s a trinket I bought from a street vendor. I don’t know if it’s worth the expense and time.”

I leaned forward and put a finger on her lips. “But it’s important to you.”

Her eyes gleamed with that exaggerated dope-love expression I found so cute.

“I’m so lucky to have a husband like you,” she declared.

“The verdict is still out on that,” I muttered. Damn, what I would give to show her what she meant to me.

Sera leaned in and clasped my jaw. “Stop the pity party. It’s unbecoming and so not you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her gaze dropped to my bare feet. “The guests are arriving soon. You need your shoes.”

I lost her closeness briefly when she rummaged through the dresser. She returned with my shoes and socks and knelt to help me put them on. Usually, I had visions of her kneeling and giving me a blow job, but right now, those visions were replaced by an intangible emotion, a tight ache in my chest.

After she was done, I cupped her cheek and tilted up her chin. “Thank you, baby.”

She smiled. “You’d do the same for me.”

No question. “I’m fine here. Go finish up. They’re waiting for us.”



Sera

“How’s our boy doing?”

I looked up from arranging the antipasti plate to see Aunt Carlotta walking in with a casserole. Beside her was Paulie. They’d visited a couple of days ago. Matteo hadn’t been in the most receptive mood then.

“Same,” I said. “Hopefully this tastier food will make him feel better.”

“He’s not used to being sidelined,” Paulie said. “Where are they?” They meaning the guys. I didn’t even try to decipher if he was asking about where my mother-in-law was.

“In the office.”

Paulie gave my aunt a quick kiss on the cheek. “You okay? I’ll check on them.”

“Sure thing, *caro*,” Carlotta said walking straight to the ovens like she’d done it a million times. She rearranged some

dishes that were cooking there.

“Oooh,” Carlotta said. “I guess this pot here is Guinness stew?”

“Yes, Mrs. De—” I was still getting used to calling my mother-in-law Mom. “Mom said it was food for the soul.”

“Poor boy, it must be killing him not to be able to drink.”

It jarred me whenever people referred to Matteo as a boy. He was all man even when he was injured, but I could hardly tell my aunt that. “He’ll just have to suck it up for a few more days.”

Carlotta laughed. “You’re just the woman to handle my nephew.”

I gave my aunt a dubious look. “Not sure about that. He can be very persuasive.”

“And bossy,” a voice called from the opening of the kitchen. Bianca and Liz walked in.

Home from Harvard, Bianca was staying with Renz and Liz for the weekend. Why spend it bouncing around in this big mansion when it was more fun in Manhattan? After we exchanged greetings, Carlotta turned to me. “Where *is* Ava?”

“Getting ready. She was busy all day with the dinner.” I had offered to help, but she said my place was with Matteo. At least she assigned me the appetizers though. I was an okay cook, but Matteo’s mother was a rock star. She moved fluidly in the kitchen. She used to be a line and prep cook at their pub. I heard Papa Cesar could hold his own in the kitchen too.

My aunt was giving my dress the once-over. “Love your little black number.”

“Thanks.” I complimented her on the turquoise satin sheath she was wearing.

“Is it from your friend’s store?” she asked.

Ivy had sent me this sweet little black dress that Matteo paid for. I wore it one time when we went to a cozy restaurant in Boothbay Wharf. Our time in Maine seemed so long ago.

“Yes.” I grinned.

“We should all go there, Aunt Lottie.” Bianca came forward, scrutinizing the lace on my dress. “It’s classic New York, but still modern. I’m digging it.”

“Is Ivy coming to dinner?” Liz asked.

I shook my head. “She’s site-hunting in Vegas.”

“I follow her on social media,” Bianca told me.

“I heard.”

“She’s so popular.” She whipped out her phone. “Her fans are asking about Matsera.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Matsera?” Carlotta asked.

“Matteo and Sera,” Liz and Bianca said at the same time. Carlotta walked over to Matteo’s sister. My aunt brought out her own phone and heaven forbid followed Ivy too.

“Dinner should be ready soon.” Ava swept into the room, stopped, and surveyed our huddle. “Wow, I’m glad I wore something other than sneakers and jeans.”

“I don’t know how you do it, but you carry it with class,” I said.

“She does.” Bianca beamed as she gave her mother a kiss. “She’s the carbon copy of Katie Moore...that supermodel of the nineties who made waif-like chic.”

“I can see that,” I said and meant it. Even my friend Ivy said Matteo’s mom was so classy.

“Okay, stop your flattery, sweetie,” Ava told her daughter. “How much?”

Everyone laughed.

Bianca groaned, “Mom, can’t I pay you a compliment?”

“Of course,” Ava insisted. “But...what’s the damage?”

Everyone laughed harder.

“Well...I’m kind of at the end of my allowance.” Bianca went into a litany of things she needed for college.

Ava shook her head. “This might take a while to discuss.” She turned to me. “Can you get the boys? Don’t bother knocking. They might pretend to ignore you unless one of them is really hungry.”

“Not sure I want to be the one interrupting them,” I said.

“I would go, but you need to learn.” Carlotta studied her nails.

I looked at Liz, and she shrugged.

“Where’s Renz and Sam?”

“Renz is on his way. Sam is with her Irish cousins. Works out well so we can have a grown-up dinner, which isn’t often.”

I smiled at her with empathy. This was a common enough problem when young kids were involved. I remembered the times when Mamma and Papà left me with the nanny. But that didn’t mean they loved me less. They just needed time for themselves, too, and I could see that was the case with Renz and Liz. They were very hands-on parents despite having to run a business.

“Looks like it’s up to me.”

Carlotta and Ava exchanged a look.

Okay, this might be some kind of test. I marched out of the dirty kitchen into their show kitchen that led into an enormous hall where I could imagine high tops or tables being set up. Above it was a domed ceiling gilded with gold. A second-floor balcony overlooked the grand hall. I could almost hear a string quartet and chatter of the gatherings that took place here all those years ago. As Matteo had told it, that was how his parents reconnected. Cesar met Ava when she was twelve and he was twenty-three. More than a decade later, they met again and it was during a party at this De Lucci mansion when things between them heated up. What was more interesting, Ava had been a part of the catering staff. Matteo also said Carlotta had been a pain in the butt that time. As my heels clacked across the floor, it looked like they had gotten over

their differences. Carlotta had her faults and could be catty and petty, but deep down she had a good heart.

I walked into the hallway and came upon the study. There were raised voices—not exactly mad at each other, but heated discussions.

“I want to get back into the swing of things on Monday,” Matteo said.

“No rush to get back,” Cesar told him. “Work from home.”

“I’m not having Mrs. Mancini come here,” my husband said. “You shouldn’t have given her hope, Dad.”

“She just needs guidance.”

“Look, I know their family has been friends with the De Luccis since Grandpa’s time, but you left me in charge.”

“This is not a discussion for tonight,” Nico started.

“And where were you in all this?” Matteo growled.

Ava’s words came back to me, but I was too unsure to just barge in there. I rapped strongly on the door and opened it. “Mrs. De Lucci said to interrupt you all to say dinner is ready.”

“And no one dares object to my wife’s decree,” Cesar said with a chuckle, but the strain was evident on his face.

“Saved by the bell,” Paulie muttered. He was seated on one of the couches and I wouldn’t have noticed him if he hadn’t spoken.

I walked into the room straight to Matteo. He was sitting behind the desk, looking paler, and a white line became prominent on his upper lip. “Are you okay?”

“He’s fine.” Nico smirked. “He’s just not used to this much excitement.”

“I can answer for myself,” Matteo snapped.

“We’ll see if the women need any help.” Cesar clapped a hand on Nico’s shoulder before jerking his chin at Paulie.

Matteo hadn't risen from his chair and he was still scowling.

I grew worried. "Are you all right? Is anything hurting?"

"I'm fine," he clipped. "Just irritated."

My eyes fell on the screen in front of him. It showed a worksheet of sorts and it didn't take my business degree to tell me the company on there was in trouble with all the negative signs and red highlights.

"Is that the Mancini account your dad is talking about?"

My husband sighed and shut the lid on the laptop.

He seemed annoyed with me as well.

"I'm sorry. Was that confidential?"

"You're my wife," he said. "I've got nothing to hide." His smile was forced and it was one I was unfamiliar with.

"Come on, I have a feeling your mother's stew is going to put you in a better mood."

He stood but held me back. "Sera...it's nothing, all right? That Mancini account? Don't worry your pretty head over it."

My stomach dropped to my toes. He made me feel worse. Unbidden tears came to my eyes, but I averted my gaze and kept a smile plastered to my face. My husband was vulnerable and deserved all my support.

"Fine with me," I said. "Come on, let's get you fed."

"I wish you'd stop treating me like a child."

I held my tongue. Our sweet time in the bedroom quickly turned on a dime when more stress was added. I had to push away thoughts that we'd rushed into this marriage.

Patience. I instinctively twisted my bracelet of St. Rita.

We walked side by side, not touching. I even let Matteo open the door for us.

My hovering over him must be wearing thin.

We were surprised to see a crowd had gathered in front of the study instead of the dining room.

Dom was talking to the guys with a thundercloud on his face. Trevor was also there with their crew.

“What’s going on?” Matteo asked.

“Santino just challenged the Galluzzo leadership and wiped out most of its inner sanctum.”

“You mean the Conte clan?” my husband pressed.

“No. Don Vincenzo Conte has gone into hiding.” Dom paused. “Santino has taken over the entire Galluzzo organization and it’s bloody chaos.”

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

SERA

It had been three weeks since Matteo's surgery, one week since the bombshell Dom dropped at the family dinner. We were on high alert, but it was hard to feel the urgency behind the walls of the De Lucci mansion.

Matteo and I were getting into a routine. We frequently spent leisurely mornings joining his parents for breakfast in the sunroom. Bianca returned to Harvard and lived with a relative in Cambridge with added security like Fort Knox. Nico stayed in Hell's Kitchen to stay close to Renz and Liz.

Everyone was keeping an eye on everyone.

A special family meeting was called this evening. Matteo hinted it was time to tell me his secrets. I had visions of a blood exchange. From what I'd gleaned so far in the comings and goings of Dom and the closed-door discussions with Matteo's side, this was more than mafia business. It involved an overarching operation that spanned both the legitimate and illegitimate side of the family.

"So, how's De Lucci doing?" Luca asked me on the phone. After breakfast, Matteo and Mr. De Lucci went into the study while his mom went to Eamonn's. I loved talking business operations with his mother. She wasn't merely a trophy wife. I could see how Ava kept Cesar on his toes. I wondered if that was Matteo's fate with me. I smiled inwardly.

“He’s recovering nicely.”

“He’s a lucky bastard.”

“Of course he is. He married me.”

Luca chuckled. “Great mentality. But how is his recovery? Any issues?”

“His liver panel came back with good numbers. No alcohol yet.” But that was upon my request, not the doctor’s.

“That would kill me.”

“Don’t say that. If Matteo could survive without alcohol in the last three weeks, you could do it too if you set your mind to it.”

“You’re not giving yourself enough credit for putting up with a man whose scotch has been banned.”

“You give me too much credit.” Although admittedly, Matteo had called me a PITA.

“Just don’t forget to take care of yourself too.”

“Aw, you worry about me too much. I’m fine,” I said. “The De Luccis are great.”

“It seems they can do no wrong in your eyes.”

“Hey, do I detect jealousy?” I laughed.

“Not at all.” He was totally jealous. My uncle was highly competitive.

“You should find a woman to marry,” I told him.

“I’m hanging up now.”

I laughed harder. “Seriously, I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“The boss of the biggest organization in Italy is now your jilted groom. He hasn’t come out and declared war yet, but your husband is out of commission. Of course I’m worried. I should send Rocco and Tony for your additional protection.”

“Do not send Tony and Rocco,” I warned. “Stop undermining Matteo. He’s on top of it.”

Silence.

“I’m serious, Luca.” I wasn’t admitting to my uncle that I’d noticed a psychological vulnerability in my husband in the weeks following his attack. He’d been regaining self-confidence. I’d be damned before I let him put doubts in my husband. Matteo was used to calling the shots. The injury had definitely taken its toll on him more than what was physical.

After another few seconds of silence, he said, “Fine.”

I ended the call just as Matteo walked into the living room. “Who was that?”

“Luca.”

His brows drew together. “He’s been calling every day.”

“He misses his bratty niece.”

Matteo looked thoughtful, and when he realized I was watching him, he smiled tightly. “Don’t forget our plans this evening.”

“I’m excited,” I said. “I can’t wait to be let into the De Lucci inner sanctum.”

A fond smile eased the tension on his face. He walked over and hauled me to my feet. “You’ve always been in my inner sanctum since I made you mine on that cliff.”

“I miss Maine.”

“When this business with Santino is over, we can go back.” He paused. “I owe you a honeymoon.”

“Soon.” I tipped up my chin for his kiss.

“Can’t wait,” he growled before claiming my mouth.



“No.”

I stared at my husband’s reflection in the bathroom mirror. I wanted to look good for our dinner date before the meeting, but I might have overdone it. I wore the pink and white bustier

with matching garters. It had comfortable boning and it pushed my breasts up to the extreme while shaping my waist without cutting off my oxygen.

Matteo and I had been circling around each other when it came to sex. In the last week, my lingering hurt feelings about the condescending “pretty head” comment had made me less receptive to my husband’s overtures. But I was about to put him out of his misery...after the meeting.

I wanted to look sexy for him, and judging from the scorching look he was giving me, I had succeeded. But...“We’re late for our reservations,” I stressed. I didn’t know if I had the willpower to resist him if he tried anything. He wasn’t the only one chafing on a sex moratorium.

Matteo wore dress pants and a shirt, open at the collar with the tie hanging around his neck. He’d tanned easily and regained the swarthiness of his skin from tinkering outdoors on his Jaguar. He was sexy as hell. And knowing what lay underneath those clothes would make sitting through dinner difficult. Maybe he was right. We should take the edge off first.

He closed the distance between us without breaking eye contact. His hands cupped my ass and squeezed. “You know how garters drive me crazy.”

I tried not to moan, but a tiny sound of pleasure escaped me. “We’re really running late, Matteo.”

“I’ll drive fast,” he murmured. He slid the palm of one hand over my hip, fingers sliding past the flimsy barrier of my thong right into my pussy.

“Ung,” I breathed, falling forward and gripping the edge of the countertop.

His breath was hot against my neck, and he was still watching me when he brought that hand back up to suck my juices off his fingers.

That action was hot as fuck. He brought his other hand to cup my jaw and turned me into his kiss, while he resumed his exploration between my legs.

He finger-fucked me while he fucked my mouth with his tongue. We'd exchanged fervent kisses, but this was something else. These kisses were like fucking.

Our tongues crossed and tangled. We broke apart and nipped at each other's jaws and lips in playful challenge all the while teasing me below. All my blood rushed to my core and I was about to come. He withdrew his fingers.

"Matteo," I sobbed. I needed his tongue or his fingers or his cock to finish the job. "I'm close."

"I know, baby," he whispered. "Not yet." He slid my panties off and bent me over the counter, kicking my feet apart. "Spread those arms. Don't move them."

I heard the clink of his belt and the sound of his zipper.

Then his cock nudged my center, sliding up and down my sensitized flesh. I was so close. The sensations were at a peak. I whimpered as a shudder wracked through me. "I need more."

His cock crowned at my pussy. "Jesus, you're tight."

"It's..." I panted. "Been a while." My toes curled in anticipation.

"I fucking missed this," he rasped. He continued pressing in. "Baby." His voice was strangled.

"Faster, Matteo."

He gave a choked sound. "I'm only a fourth of the way in."

"What? Shit." I tried to rise, but he pushed me back down. I grew wetter.

I already felt so full of him.

He withdrew slightly to push back in. Then he started rocking, trying to wedge his big cock into me. Every time I tried to help him, he pushed my shoulder down. I was panting and sweating all over my makeup. "Hurry."

"Dammit, baby." He pulled back and punched in.

I hissed. The pleasure stung. He started pounding in earnest. Thrust for thrust, I surged back to meet him and my wetness lubricated me as he buried himself balls deep, over and over. He fingered my clit and I exploded in waves of pleasure, crying out. He followed me soon after, grunting loudly as his cum pulsed inside me.

I missed this.

I missed his domination.

I missed our connection.

Matteo folded over me and cleared the hair from my face. He kissed the back of my shoulder, the back of my neck. I tingled at the sweetness of his gesture.

“Let me get you cleaned up,” he murmured. “We’re late.”

The parking behind The Grindhouse building was almost full. Matteo parked the Jaguar behind a Ferrari which I knew belonged to Paulie.

As we headed in, we ran into Ronan. Somehow I wasn’t surprised to see him, but his appearance meant I was correct and this involved more than the De Lucci crime family.

Instead of heading up the stairs to the apartment, we walked past the boxing gym to a door behind the staircase I never knew existed.

Trevor was manning the entrance.

“Hey, girl,” he said. Without waiting for him to come forward, I left Matteo’s side and gave him a hug. I was promptly pulled back.

Trevor chuckled and gestured for us to head on down. “Your uncle and Dom are already there.”

As we descended the steps, I whispered to Matteo, “How about your dad?”

“Dad feels it would undermine my authority and your introduction if he shows up tonight. He already did the

turnover to me last year. It would raise doubts about my capability to lead, especially after I've been shot."

"Oh, Matteo."

"It'll be fine, baby," he said gruffly. "I'm already feeling more like myself."

When we reached the bottom of the steps, I clasped his hand. "I'm glad."

He exhaled a breath, tugging me to his side. "Ready?"

Curtains surrounding the landing served like a pass-through between sections. We turned right. Matteo split the curtain and I'd never been more self-conscious in my entire life.

Not since the first time I'd given a speech at a charity gala.

Heads turned our way. Men and women were in business suits while others wore black-clad gear typical of military black ops. I recognized a few men from Ronan's team.

I hesitated, unsure of myself.

Nico's voice said behind me, "Give them hell, Sera. You're Lady Archer now."

"Lady what?" I glanced at Matteo.

"Thanks, bro." My husband looked over his shoulder. "Don't ruin the ceremony."

"This isn't some kind of kinky cult, right?" I gulped.

Nico's chest shook with laughter.

"That's a negative," Matteo said. I didn't know what he saw on my face, but his brows drew together. "Do you want to go to a kink club?"

I chewed on my bottom lip. "Not sure."

Matteo whispered in my ear, "We'll find out."

I couldn't tell if he was serious or teasing.

"Hey, lovebirds, save that for later," Paulie called amidst a sea of black.

Matteo told me Carlotta hadn't wanted to be involved in the organization after finding out what it did, preferring to remain oblivious but supportive.

It was up to me to decide after they gave me the facts.

"Nephew..." Paulie dragged Matteo over and gave him a hug. "Glad to have you back in the fray."

"Thanks, Paulie," Matteo said. I felt a slight tension strumming down his arm to our joined fingers, but it dissipated quickly.

The basement was basic with exposed brick and ventilation ducts giving it an industrial interior. I spied computers stacked at the end of the wall hidden by a half divider. The area that we were in had trays of sandwiches and boxes of coffee.

Matteo and I had already eaten dinner for which I was thankful, because I didn't think I'd be able to eat now that anxiety was gnawing in my gut, about to learn about my husband's secret life.

We were mingling with a couple from Connecticut when Daniel appeared. Somehow, I wasn't surprised either. My brain had been trying to piece together who was involved. After the scene at the nightclub, I knew Matteo and Daniel were more than business partners.

I'd never seen Daniel this pissed though.

Matteo stiffened beside me.

"This is what you do?" Daniel confronted my husband.

"Daniel!" I gasped. "What the hell?"

"This is neither the place nor time," Dom cut in. "Respect, bro."

Daniel looked at me, his face torn with regret. "I didn't want you involved in any of this."

Confused by his words, I wasn't able to ask him what he meant because Matteo cut in. "Enough. Remember who you're talking to, Wu. Sera is my wife now."

An ugly sneer distorted Daniel's face. There were unspoken words and venom in the tension that fell between the two friends.

Were they still friends?

Nico grabbed Daniel's arm. "Come on."

Matteo led me toward the center of the room. I was in a daze trying to process.

What didn't Daniel want me to be a part of? A knot of apprehension twisted my gut. I trusted Matteo, right?

He was my husband.

I had vowed to him for better or worse. Heck, we'd already gone through in sickness and in health.

"Let's get this ball rolling." There was an urgency in his voice. My vision swam for a moment, taking in the sea of faces. I contemplated passing out and maybe delaying the ceremony. Listen to Daniel's argument. What would it be? That my husband participated in criminal activities? That wouldn't surprise me.

A server appeared and started handing out champagne. I raised a brow at Matteo.

"One glass should be fine, especially in this moment."

The doctor did say at our discretion.

Matteo raised his flute to our audience. A string of tension pulled taut when he and Daniel locked eyes across the room. Matteo's smile stretched to that fake one I hated. Like a jackrabbit in the presence of a predator, I wanted to bolt from the room, but when my husband turned his focus on me, pride was the only thing I could see reflected in his gaze. He flashed a smile that settled the uncertainty roiling in my stomach.

"Sera, welcome to the Archer Syndicate."

A round of enthusiastic welcome and cheers went around the room.

"My father started this organization in 1996," he continued. "Global law enforcement left us alone as long as

we're able to keep the criminal underworld under control.”

Matteo continued to give a gist of the organization. Archers were the heads of different territories. Matteo was Archer Prime who oversaw operations in North America and Daniel handled South East Asia. Ronan handled Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine. Dom handled New York, which in itself was huge. Their soldiers were called Arrows—people clad in black tactical clothes like Trevor. The men and women in suits were Archers who managed the Arrows. They could also work alone and do purely financial matters. After RICO, organized crime had intertwined itself so deep into Wall Street, it needed several people to monitor.

After my introduction as Matteo's wife, the chatter among groups resumed. People came up to us to welcome me into the organization.

When I was able to assimilate the facts better, something bugged me, but like a misfiring engine, my brain refused to make the connection.

“The Galluzo was set to become the strongest organization in Italy if Santino had married me,” I said.

Matteo shrugged.

“We had a workaround.” Dom joined our conversation. He gave me a one-arm hug and said, “Welcome, cuz.”

“Luca is not part of this, right?” I asked.

Dom shook his head. “Uncle is too much of a wildcard, but we do have connections in Chicago.”

“He's heard rumors. Or rather he said, the De Luccis don't play fair.”

“Rumors are good.” Paulie walked up to our huddle. “Keep people wary. The stupid and greedy ones are more likely going to get exposed.”

“And what's your role?”

“I'm here as adviser. I'm too old for this shit,” Paulie said. “That's why Cesar and I are retiring. Leaving it to the young ones.”

“So where does this problem with Santino and the Galluzo stand?” I asked.

Matteo looked at Dom and then back at me. “This is the perfect example of how we operate. We have the underworld, and the Archers are what run parallel with the underworld. We don’t interfere unless we see a shift in power that would make one organization too powerful to the detriment of the rest.”

“So you’re an equalizer?” I asked.

“That’s a good word for it,” Matteo said. “This thing with Santino and the Galluzo is still too chaotic to determine who has the upper hand.”

“So, now that I know about this organization,” I said. “What’s my role as your wife?”

Matteo grinned. “You can choose to be involved in meetings. You can offer counsel.” He looked around the room. “The mafia as a patriarchy is dead. Wives and sisters can play larger roles if they wish to.” He nodded to several women both dressed in business suits and black tactical gear. “Or you could choose as Carlotta and Mom did to remain in the know, but not involved. It’s up to you.”

I exhaled a sharp breath. “This is a lot to take in.”

“There’s no rush, baby.” He kissed my temple.

After our huddle broke up, Matteo encouraged me to talk to the other Archers and Arrows. Each one had a story to tell about how they ended up joining the organization. Most of them had been victims of criminal organizations that had gotten too powerful. More than a few were already related to members. Still, vetting was stringent, especially when coming in as a distant relative or through friendship.

“So, how are you finding your new role, Sera?” I turned to see Renz.

“Matteo is giving me time. I didn’t see you earlier.”

“I like to stay in the background. I’m more of an associate than an Arrow.”

“Oh.”

“It was Mom’s idea,” he said. “After what happened to Liz, it didn’t feel right. Don’t get me wrong. When Sam gets older, maybe I’ll take a more active role. But right now”—he tipped his chin toward the table of food and drinks—“I’m happy to provide coffee and sanctuary.”

I laughed. “I think coffee is a noble cause.”

“Got that right.”

“I better look for my husband and make sure he’s not sneaking a shot of scotch somewhere.”

Renz laughed and waved me off.

The crowd had thinned. I couldn’t find him in the room where we had the meeting, so I walked over to where the computer servers were humming. I found Trevor.

He grinned. “Hey, Sera, welcome to the dark side.”

“It’s not that dark. You forget who my uncle is.”

“I’d say you’re a perfect fit,” one of the Arrows with Trevor said.

“Aw, thanks. Have you seen Matteo?”

“I think I saw him and Daniel go to the Armory.”

“Armory?”

“It’s on the left, coming down from the staircase.”

“Oh, behind the curtain.”

“Yup.”

I headed back to the meeting room and through the dividing curtain and was greeted with an iron door. Curious, I tested the handle and it was unlocked. I was a part of them now, so I had free rein of the basement, right?

“Did you tell her, huh?” Daniel yelled.

I stilled, my hand pausing on the lever, wondering if I should let them know I was here.

“Keep your voice down.”

Was Matteo hiding something else from me? I thought all was said in that meeting. My heart sped up a couple of beats, as if I was on the cusp of falling off a cliff.

“Or what? You’re afraid Sera is going to find out that you and I planned to make me jealous?”

What? The champagne I consumed turned sour in my stomach.

“You lost your chance, Wu.”

“Did you tell her about the shares? That you dated her to force Gustavo to sell to you in exchange for leaving Sera alone?”

What shares?

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Fuck you, De Lucci.”

“Both of you,” Nico cut in. “Save it for later.”

Taking several calming breaths, I pushed open the door. “How about now?”

Matteo whipped around, his face an implacable mask, but I’d known my husband long enough to tell he was feral and wanted to snap Daniel’s head off.

The other man wasn’t cowed at all. He looked just as pissed.

“Explain,” I said.

The two eyed each other.

“From what I can tell so far, both of you conspired to play with my feelings,” I said.

“It wasn’t like that,” Daniel said hoarsely. “I genuinely care about you, Sera.” He reached out an arm, but I gave a shake of my head, so he dropped it to his side. “I didn’t want to bring you into this.”

“This as in the Archers?” I laughed without humor. “You know who my uncle is, right? I’m not some damn damsel in distress. I know how to defend myself. I’ve held a gun since I

was twelve and I know how to use it. You do not grow up in the mafia not knowing these things.”

“I wanted you and Ivy to be far away from what we were doing,” Daniel argued. “She’s had enough tragedy from our father’s death. I wanted her to have a normal life. To feel safe.”

“What does that even mean?” I said. “You’re hunting down the people who hurt your family?”

“The Triad. All the criminal organizations,” he said. “They cannot have too much power.”

“I got that,” I said. That was why Daniel was always in Asia, while he kept Ivy in the United States. “But what does that have to do with keeping Ivy out of it?”

Matteo and Daniel looked at each other. Ivy’s brother’s shoulder slumped. “I wanted her to have a normal life.” He already said that.

“She’s a social media star. That’s far from normal.” Something occurred to me. “Oh my God. You’re using that as smoke and mirrors. You’re using your sister to disguise your movements.”

“That’s not what that is,” Daniel snapped. “The Triad needs to know that we’re not seeking them out.”

“I’ve told Wu that keeping Ivy out was impossible,” Matteo said. “Sooner or later going after the people who we’re trying to keep under control will figure things out. Look what happened to me.”

“You never addressed that in there,” I said.

Matteo was edging closer but stopped when I physically recoiled. Taking a step back, I hugged my biceps and glared at him.

“The matter has been addressed. The postmortem of that incident has been distributed to the Archers.”

“He didn’t want to appear weak in there by explaining how Santiago got to him,” Daniel said.

“I can very well explain it to my wife,” Matteo snapped. “Before the Galluzo, we were trying to rein in the Santiago organization.”

“I’ve heard of them. They have ties to the Mexican cartels.”

“Yes. We were able to subdue them, but there were splinter groups.” Nico was the one who answered. I remembered him taking the lead role with the security team when Matteo was shot. “There usually are, but they know better than to call attention to themselves again. One of them planted a person inside our hotel. Some kind of blackmail scheme where our employee reported on our movements. The attack on Matteo was pure luck. When we checked in, the person was on duty and reported to Santiago. The security division of our resorts do stringent background checks on our employees. This was a one-off.”

“He’s not going to make it to the hearing,” Matteo said.

Mob justice. The expression on my husband’s face gave me chills.

“You could have been killed,” he said. “I’m making sure none of it will touch you.”

“But you brought me into your fold,” I said.

“You are my queen.”

“Wait a second.” I held up my hand when Matteo inched closer, then pointed my finger between the two of them. “What is this about the shares?”

The two men looked at each other. Nico found his shoes interesting.

I fought the hysteria bubbling up my throat as the circuits in my brain started making connections. “Gustavo never liked you,” I told Matteo. “You dating me didn’t even have anything to do with Daniel, did it?”

When Matteo didn’t answer, I looked at Ivy’s brother. “Daniel?” My voice cracked.

“After the rumor between you and Matteo started, Gustavo offered him the shares.”

I looked back at Matteo. “And continuing to date me? Surely Gustavo wasn’t pleased with that and went against his wishes.”

“That had nothing to do with Gustavo anymore but the threat of Santino.”

“But what would that matter if you have the shares?” My whole world was crumbling, but I was hoping against hope that our time in Maine was real.

“I cared what happened to you.” Matteo’s voice was low, but I knew him enough to know he was still hiding something.

The back of my eyes started to burn. I glanced at the ceiling to keep the tears from falling, as I asked, “The day we flew to Vegas...why was Gustavo in New York?”

“Sera.” Matteo’s voice was rough. When I looked at him, his face was full of remorse, and I feared the worst. His brilliant blue eyes were stormy, but no further words came.

“Someone answer me!” I screeched. My gaze swung to Nico. “Why was Zio Gus in New York that day?”

Nico stared at me steadily. “He was giving you the rest of the shares.”

A wounded gasp escaped my lips.

Matteo started for me again, but I retreated to the door, shaking my head. “And you, husband...” Even I could hear the ache in my voice. “Did you know?”

His mouth was a thin flat line, jaw clenched so tight, he exhaled heavily. “Yes.”

“When?”

“Does it matter?”

“I guess it doesn’t anymore.” I pivoted on a heel to walk away.

He grabbed my arm and spun me around to face him.

“You’re my wife, of course it matters.”

“I don’t feel like one,” I shouted. “You married me buried under so many lies! And guess what? Until I can figure out if I can live with them, we can call this a true marriage of convenience.”

His eyes widened at my statement, and I took that opportunity to free myself from his hold and walk away from him. I slammed the iron door behind me and ran into Renz.

He searched my face and immediately noted something was wrong.

It was hard to hide because my face was streaked with tears. “Did you know?”

His brows furrowed. “I’m pretty sure I don’t.”

The door behind me opened. Renz looked over my shoulder. “What did you do?”

When no one answered, I said, “I am a pawn to deceitful men.”

“That’s not true,” Matteo said.

The bile trying to push against my diaphragm was a testament to how strongly I felt about this discovery. Matteo and I started from a lie. In my book our vows were tainted.

I turned and jabbed a finger at his chest. “I will decide whether I will tolerate your deception.”

“What did he do?” Renz asked.

“Ask him.”

I started up the stairs.

“Where the hell are you going?” Matteo demanded.

I stopped midway. I had nowhere to go. My tears fell faster. “I’ll call Ivy.”

“You’re not leaving here,” he growled. “It’s not safe.”

I stomped my foot and let out a cry of frustration. “Dammit.”

“She can stay with us,” Renz said. “I’ll text Liz to expect her.”

“My wife stays with me,” Matteo argued.

I was getting tired of turning my back on him and having to face him again. But this would be the last time. “At this moment, I’m not sure if I’m calling you my husband.”

His face fell, and the hurt on it nearly dissolved the steel in my spine. I marched up the stairs away from him and didn’t turn around again, even when my name reached me in a hoarse, broken whisper.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

MATTEO

“You fucking asshole.”

I punched Daniel across his face. Blood splattered and a sick satisfaction washed over me.

“Fuck.” He staggered back.

I came after him.

“This is not fair, man,” he said. “I’m not fighting back.”

“And I’m not hitting you again until you will,” I snarled. “But fuck you for sticking your nose in my marriage.”

“Sera is a friend and you lied to her.”

“I omitted.” It was a losing excuse and I knew it. Nico was already shaking his head, while Daniel sneered, and if he would just fight back, I would have hit him again. So I threw a verbal jab instead. “You were too pussy to own up to your feelings for Sera. I got tired of you hurting her.”

“Would someone mind telling me what’s going on?” Renz scrubbed his face in frustration. “Because I’ve got a pissed-off Sera at my apartment and I wanna know what I’ll be expecting.”

“Matteo and I hatched the fake-dating plan,” Daniel said.

“Wait a minute,” Renz said. “It was never real?”

“At first,” I corrected. “When Wu chickened out at the dance club, I was done playing with Sera’s emotions.”

“I told you why.”

“It’s as weak of an excuse as my own for omitting the truth from Sera.”

“You should have told her before you got married!” Daniel shouted. “And guess what else you should have told her before you flew off to Vegas? The shares!”

“Wait. Wait. Wait,” Renz cut in. “It has to be real. That time when you asked me to teach you to make that latte art?”

“I already wanted Sera then.”

“You asshole,” Daniel said. “You’ve been waiting in the wings all along.”

“I gave you an opportunity, Wu. You fucked up. I took over. I’m not sorry. Sera deserved better.”

“Yes. She deserved the truth!”

“Back up,” Renz cut in. “And what is this about the shares?”

Nico gave the gist of it to our youngest brother, who started shaking his head and looking at me like I’d committed the crime of the century.

I glanced in the direction of the staircase. I couldn’t erase the image of Sera’s distraught face and the tears rolling down her cheeks. I was the bastard who put them there. “I’ll make it up to her.”

Daniel huffed and checked his phone. “It’s not going to be easy.” He looked at me. “She brought reinforcements.”



Sera

“What we need is a plan,” my alcohol-lightweight friend slurred. “I can’t believe my brother used our friendship to pump me for information. And how dare he hide this she-cret shtuff from me.”

Apparently her brother told her about the real nature of the shell company Bowman Inc. before he left for the Archer meeting tonight. That included the sale of Gustavo’s shares. They probably knew it wasn’t fair for me to know about the Archers and continue leaving Ivy in the dark. At least they didn’t fuck that up. But right now, both Matteo and Daniel were on our shitlist.

Liz was on our side and equally appalled with what the men had done.

She’d already put Sam to bed, so she joined us in the kitchen where we continued our rant about deceitful men.

“A plan for revenge!” I was getting fired up. It was embarrassing enough that Daniel knew of my attraction and purposely suggested to use it to sway me. I was so hurt, more than angry, and I was damn glad Ivy was offended for me.

“Yes.” We raised our tequila glasses and took shots. I hadn’t had alcohol in a while in solidarity with Matteo. But fuck him, I was getting drunk tonight.

Our relationship was built on a lie.

Which meant our marriage was a lie.

“You’re lucky you married the good brother,” I told Liz, sliding my shot glass to Ivy, who poured me another shot.

“I am.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t get corrupted,” I continued.

“Can I make an observation?” Liz asked.

“It depends.” I swayed toward her. “Are you going to defend my lying husband?”

She winced. “I really think Matteo was just scared of losing you.”

“Ooh...ohh...” I made a humorous sound. “I’m sure that’s his first excuse. But guess what? It’s not going to work.”

“Let him work for it,” Ivy agreed. “Here, drink up.”

“Aren’t you two going too fast?” Liz said.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Are you lecturing us? Why aren’t you drinking?”

“Someone’s got to be the responsible adult until Renz returns...”

The doorknob rattling called our attention to the entryway. Renz walked in, followed by Matteo and Nico.

“You shall not pass!” I yelled.

“Cool it, Gandalf,” Nico said.

I narrowed my eyes, recalling it was a line from *The Lord of the Rings*. I wasn’t sure. But I know for sure these De Luccis take their movies seriously courtesy of the McGrath side of the family.

“I don’t want him here,” I declared.

“Baby...” Matteo started.

“Don’t you ‘baby’ me.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Ha! Good observation.” I stood, but the room started spinning. Matteo and Renz rushed forward, but I held up a hand. “Don’t come near me.”

“Maybe Sera should stay with us tonight,” Liz said.

“Good idea,” I agreed. “That way I won’t be charged with spousal homicide tomorrow morning.”

“I’m not leaving my wife here. She sleeps with me,” Matteo said.

“Well, it’s not your choice anymore,” I retorted. “So scram. We girls are having a discussion on how to take our revenge.”

His brows drew together. “Revenge?”

“Shh...” Ivy said. “Don’t spill the beans. Revenge is sweeter when they are not expecting it.” She looked drunkenly at the guys. “Where’s my brother?”

“He went home,” Nico said. “I told him I’ll take you but it seems it’s better if you sleep this shit off.”

Ivy squinted at him. “You’re also a part of this conspiracy.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Matteo exploded. “It was an omission.”

I turned to my group of girlfriends. “Is he still making excuses?”

“Looks like it,” Ivy agreed.

Liz nodded.

“Renz, tell your wife to stay out of this.”

“Tell her yourself, asshole. “

Matteo looked up to the ceiling and then glowered at his shoes before returning his eyes to me. “You’ll sleep here. I’ll stay on the third floor.”

“Ask Nico to stay with you,” I said.

My husband raised a brow. “So you still care about me?”

“I’m not stupid. The sooner you heal, the sooner I can leave you.”

“You are not leaving me,” he snapped.

“Come on, bro.” Renz grabbed his biceps and then tipped his chin at Nico. “You too. We all need to have a chat.”

“What chat?” I asked suspiciously.

Renz rolled his eyes. “They obviously don’t know how to handle women. I’m on your side on this, Sera—”

“Wow, thanks, bro,” Matteo said disparagingly.

“But they’re still my blood and I’d hate for them to dig their holes deeper.”

“Oh, let them dig,” I said. “I’ll help with a shovel.”

Ivy and I high-fived each other.

Liz was staring at us, also, giving a shake of her head. “Women scorned.”

Matteo was about to open his mouth again, but Renz dragged him out of the apartment.



Matteo

“You two are idiots.”

Our youngest brother forced us to go up to the rooftop. I remembered the first night Sera came to the apartment and she was curious about what was up here. A pang stabbed my chest. I was breathing heavily because my body had been laid up for a while and walking up an extra flight of steps took a lot out of me.

Who was I kidding?

It was my anxiety, and I was close to hyperventilating.

“Oh, just because you’re married, you’re an expert now?” Nico sneered.

“Better than you two,” Renz shot back. “Liz and I have our problems but we’ve been married five years and we love each other now more than ever.”

“That’s sweet, but your situation is different from mine.” I pinched my brows. “She’ll get over it, right?”

I hated how Renz looked at me with pity. “What?”

“I don’t know Sera enough. Why exactly did you agree to Daniel’s plan?”

“I told him that was a shit move,” Nico said.

“You mentioned it, but you didn’t talk me out of it,” I argued. “We needed to light a fire under Gustavo’s ass. He rejected our offer.”

“You never told me why he refused to sell.”

I scrubbed my hand over my face, not wanting to rehash reasons I wasn't sure of anymore. Renz had never been interested in our business dealings. His life was his family and the café.

“He holds a grudge over Aunt Carlotta picking a De Lucci over him.” I gave my youngest brother a gist of that failed arranged marriage.

He shook his head. “That was thirty years ago.”

“Exactly. These people have long memories.”

“He'd deal if it was with Dad. He told me as much.”

“Ouch.”

“To him we're mongrels.”

“But he changed his tune when I showed an interest in Sera. Our agreement was I would back off and he'd sell me the shares.”

“Is Daniel interested in Sera?”

It pissed me off to hear my former friend's and my wife's names in the same sentence.

“He went pussy on her. It cost him,” I said. “Sera is mine now.”

“Hmm, not for long, I hear.”

“Fuck you! Are you on my side or not?”

Renz crossed his arms and eyed Nico, who'd been smoking a cigarette in one corner. “Don't leave that butt up here.”

Nico flipped him off.

“Why do I feel like the grown-up here?” Renz groaned.

“You probably are,” I mumbled.

“What?” Renz cupped his ear. “Did my big brother just admit to immaturity?”

“Maybe. So tell me what to do.”

“This is not a one-size-fits-all solution, brother.” Renz regarded me thoughtfully. “Why did you pick Maine?”

“She loves lobster rolls. She doesn’t like fancy food. I don’t think I can get her to go with me there right now.”

“It’s not safe to leave New York anyway,” Nico said. He flicked the ash from the tip of his cigarette.

Renz scowled at him. “You’re sweeping that.”

“Can we focus on my issue?” I growled.

My youngest brother stared at me in a way that made me squirm.

“What?”

He shook his head. “That right there is the issue. Your issue. Not Sera’s issue with you.”

“Semantics.”

“Maybe, but we return to the lie.”

“It was an omission!”

“It was an omission until you said your vows, Matteo. After that, it became a lie.”

“How do I fix this?”

Envy snaked around my heart that Renz had his shit together. He was content with his existence. I’d be bored. I couldn’t quit the rat race. Yet those days with Sera in Maine and these past few weeks of convalescence, I’d been irritated with anything that encroached on my time with her. At the same time it validated my existence to be the patriarch of the family I was going to build with her. I didn’t think I would change who I was, but even now, my priorities were shifting to Sera.

I just needed for her to see it.

“Only you can answer it.”

“That’s not very helpful.”

“No, you already said it. What are you willing to change or give up to have Sera? You used her to get Gustavo to sell you

the shares.”

“You’re not suggesting I get rid of the shares.”

“No, but you’ll have to prove she’s more important than them.”

“We’re not only talking about business. We’re talking about the Galluzo becoming too powerful.”

“You’re smart. You’ll find a way.”

We stayed on the rooftop for another half hour just shooting the shit. I brooded while Nico and Renz got into a good-natured ribbing. When had my youngest brother grown up to be the most sensible man between the three of us? I didn’t know. Liz domesticated him. But was that so bad? And they had Sam.

I imagined what our kids would look like and my heart rolled over in my chest. I wanted that future very much. But our relationship, our marriage had to go back to normal.

She was just mad. After she got over her snit, she would forgive me. I would remind her of our time together in Maine, and how devoted she was when I got shot.

I scowled. Was it simply duty that made her take care of me? I swore there was love.

We never said we loved each other.

I was pretty sure this was what love felt like. A punch in the gut when you hurt the person you loved. The betrayal in Sera’s eyes ripped me apart, made me want to roar that I didn’t mean it. I would have told her if I knew it would have made a difference to how she viewed our vows. Things happened so quickly between Maine and Vegas, I thought I had time to come clean. I didn’t think of it as a betrayal. I didn’t want to ruin the moment.

Turned out my omission didn’t ruin the moment. It obliterated our vows.

No. It was real to me. My chest grew tight. I needed to hold Sera. “Let’s go back to your apartment.”

“Wait, I thought you were sleeping separately tonight?”
Renz protested.

I checked my watch. “I still want to check on her.”

“Yeah.” Nico exhaled an irritated breath. “I promised Daniel I’d take care of Ivy.”

“Just text him,” Renz said. “They can stay with me.”

Not if I had a say.

When we returned to his place, the women were lying on the sectional. Liz was watching television and she cast a wry smile at the two women mumbling nonsensical stuff.

“You!” Sera said when she spotted me. “Why are you still here?”

If I wasn’t in such a precarious position, I’d tease her. She was a cute drunk.

She rose from the couch and then her eyes widened. “I’m going to be sick again.”

She ran from the room and it appeared that despite the alcohol in her system, she knew the way to the toilet.

I stalked after her. By the time I reached her she was dry heaving into the porcelain bowl.

“Oh, baby,” I said and sank to my knees beside her. I gathered her hair into a ponytail and held it up while she retched some more. I’d done this for Bianca before. It seemed to be part of an older brother’s requirement.

And right now, a husband’s requirement.

“I hate you,” she said between heaves.

“I know.”

“I wish I’d never married you.”

I swallowed. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“How?” She started to sob. “This is so fucked up.”

She rose from the floor, ran water in the sink to wash her face, and swished mouthwash to freshen her mouth.

She sniffed and looked at me, eyes blotchy, face tragic.

“I’ll make it up to you,” I repeated.

“You need to go home.”

“I don’t want to leave you here.”

“I need space, Matteo. You owe me that.”

My possessiveness roared inside me. Space to do what? I gave a brief nod. “For tonight.”

“Until I say so.”

I didn’t acknowledge or deny her request. She was too exhausted and I wanted her to sleep. I probably wasn’t going to have any, but at least I’d be upstairs.

Nico and I left after the girls retired to the guest bedroom. Ivy was already out of it and Nico had to carry her. Liz helped him get her more comfortable.

As my brother and I trudged up the stairs, we were both silent. I was too consumed with my own thoughts and he was probably annoyed that he was forced to look out for Ivy just to keep Daniel and me from going at each other’s throats.

“You can go home,” I told him finally. “I don’t need help.”

“Just open the damn door and let this fucked-up day be over,” he grumbled.

I couldn’t agree more.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

SERA

“Not another word.”

Little hammers pounded away in my head. It felt like my brain was squeezing out of my skull, but it was nothing compared to the daggers digging into my heart. I didn’t know what to do with my feelings for Matteo—thinking I was so lucky to find the one. Marrying for love and not convenience. How the situation had changed quickly after not only one but two revelations.

I didn’t trust my own emotions.

Ivy was reclining in the booth. We were in Jabbin’ Java. We’d already imposed too much on Liz and Renz and had no plans of disrupting their morning by having them entertain two hungover girls. Besides, hanging out in their apartment meant watching cartoons with Samantha. The buzz in the bakery was better, not to mention the smell of freshly brewed coffee. My stomach was too queasy to take in a croissant.

I felt bad for giving Ivy a hangover, but she was such a good friend and kept up with me and my self-pity.

She peered at me over her shades. “Answer me this: Did Matteo and Nico check on us in the middle of the night?”

“Yes.”

“That’s so sweet.”

According to Renz, the brothers couldn't sleep and went home to gather our stuff so we could have it first thing in the morning.

"Dammit," I muttered.

Ivy wagged a finger at me. "Stay strong, my friend."

"You said it was sweet."

"That is one act," she whispered. "He kept his scheme with my brother a secret all this time. He should have come clean before he asked you to marry him."

"That's what I don't get."

"Are you ladies fine over here?" Liz walked up to us.

"Don't worry about us."

"Hungry yet?"

I shook my head.

"Instead of a croissant, how about bacon and eggs?" Liz suggested.

I looked at the breakfast board. "You don't serve bacon and eggs."

"Eamonn's does and it's just up the block."

My mouth salivated, but I could barely lift my head much less walk a block.

"I don't have the energy," Ivy whined.

"You don't have to lift a finger. I can just tell Matteo and Nico to pick it up."

Liz was typing into her phone when I yelled, "Don't—"

I winced at the sound of my own voice. Ivy groaned.

"I don't want any more favors from him."

"Honey," Liz said gently. "He's your husband. It's not a favor."

Greasy fried food was the cure for a hangover. "Fine. But I still don't forgive him. Please put that in your text."

Liz chuckled and walked away.

“Well, at least no one is saying I should forgive Matteo.”

“Make him grovel.”

I huffed. “Why? Making him grovel means I’m taking him back. I don’t want to lead him on if I’m not.”

Ivy’s face fell. “But you love him.”

I stared at my coffee cup, then at the menu on the wall. Tears started forming at the edges of my eyes and I surreptitiously wiped them away with the back of my hand. Rolling my lips, I cleared my throat before saying, “It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

I shouldn’t have looked at Ivy, because once I saw the pity etched on her face, my own crumpled, and no self-righteous anger could fortify the dam of tears I’d been holding back.

Noticing my near breakdown, Ivy rose from behind the booth, teetering on her heels before getting me up from my seat. We went into the bathroom, and she crammed both of us into the tiny toilet, which was considered spacious by Manhattan standards.

“Can I castrate him the next time I see him?” Ivy said. She carried a pocketknife in her bag.

“You’re a good friend,” I hiccuped.

“I really liked Matteo, too,” Ivy said. “I really liked you with him. More than with Daniel.”

“You never liked me with Daniel.”

“Because I knew he wouldn’t make you happy. He’s too focused on business.”

“So is Matteo.”

“No, there’s something about your husband. It’s the way he looks at you.”

“Don’t say it’s love.”

Ivy sighed. “I want a man to look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m the center of his universe.”

“Matteo doesn’t look at me like that,” I whispered. If yesterday hadn’t happened, then maybe.

“Let’s make it Daniel’s fault,” Ivy said.

“You’re throwing your brother under the bus?”

“He’s cutthroat enough to think of the scheme on his own.”

“Now you’re ruining my idea of him being a doting brother.”

“I’ll ruin every idea you have of him after what he pulled,” Ivy said. “You’re my friend. I’m very disappointed in him.”

“Men are disappointing.”

“Are you going to tell Luca?” Ivy asked.

His voice from my teenage years echoed in my head. “*Don’t ever cry over a boy.*”

“No,” I said. “I’ll be a disappointment to him.”

“What?”

“He told me never to let a boy make me cry.”

“What kind of advice is that?”

“It’s making sense to me now.”

“No, that only closes your heart to love.”

“Why, Ivy, I didn’t know you were a romantic. You’re always so blasé about these things.”

“I’ve seen you with Matteo.”

“Well, you know now we’ve been looking through rose-colored lenses.”

A light rap on the door was followed by, “Are you two okay in there?”

Ivy and I looked at each other, then burst out laughing and immediately stopped to groan while holding on to our hungover, pounding heads. “Yes. We’ve made a pact to swear off men.”

“Well, said men are on their way, and from what I’ve gathered, they’re bringing the family.”

“Shit, what?” I whispered, clutching Ivy’s hand. “You better not leave me.”

“I won’t.”

“And if they try to make me cave, don’t let me.”

“Nope. We need an epic grovel.” Ivy gave a series of nods.

“We haven’t decided—”

“They’ll be here in ten minutes,” Liz cut in.

“Thank you, Liz,” I called.

“Okay, let’s go over his possible groveling approaches.” She grasped my hand. “Number one. I know Matteo is pushy, but don’t let him step all over you and force you to forgive him before you’re ready. Make sure he knows that shit’s not gonna fly. Number two. He needs to be sorry in actions, not just in words. Also, a bouquet of flowers is nice, but it’s so cliché. And sorry, Matteo being rich is against him. Expensive gifts are not going to cut it. I don’t care if he gifts you a whole city block or the entire Van Cleef & Arpels collection. He needs to dig deep, chica.”

“You sound more offended than I am.”

Ivy looked at me strangely as though what I said was incomprehensible. “I’m your best friend.”

My heart warmed. “Aw...”

“Oh, one more thing and this is important. If in any way he makes you think it’s your fault. And believe me, men sometimes do that when they know they’re losing an argument, then he’s an asshole. I just want you to know that’s not okay in this scenario. This mess is all his fault. Well, his and Daniel’s.”

Ivy’s eyes had clouded, and I had a feeling this was more about her than me, but before I could dwell on it, she dragged me into a hug. “You got this.”

I laughed. “I thought *we* did.”

“Well, for the times I’m not with you. Stay strong.”

“I’ll have your voice in my head.”

We both stared at the closed door. “Shall we?”

She gave me a thumbs up and an encouraging smile.

Then we proceeded with Operation Strengthen My Resolve to resist Matteo.



Matteo

Liz refused to rat on the women. Not that I blamed her. If ever there was a moral counterpoint to how the family did its business, it was my youngest brother and Liz. I used to resent her for that, and I couldn’t see past my guilt that I played a part in the injury that screwed up her leg.

But it was more than that.

She made my brother happy, and I envied the adoration in Renz’s eyes whenever he looked at his wife. But she was so sweet despite everything that happened to her, the resentment slowly grew to admiration and then acceptance that she was very much a part of the family.

“Now, remember, don’t be an asshole.” Mom’s voice cut through my musings. Second to Sera’s devastation at what I had done, Mom’s disappointment was making me feel an inch tall.

Dad let her rant at me all morning. I spotted the amusement in his eyes. Deception was a part of De Lucci men’s arsenal.

“I don’t know why you’re so worked up over it. Dad did the same thing,” I pointed out.

“Don’t drag me into it.”

“Like father, like son,” Nico snickered.

“You married her without coming clean about your plan with Daniel,” Dad said. “You should have told her about the shares. That’s the big one.”

“Would you have come clean to Mom if she hadn’t caught you in the lie?”

“It wasn’t a lie,” Dad said. “It was an omission.”

Exasperated, I gritted, “I rest my case.”

“Careful with the containers,” Mom cautioned. “You don’t want to serve your wife a breakfast mess.”

“It’s bacon and eggs, and it is a breakfast mess. That’s what a hangover needs,” I retorted.

Mom stopped walking and put a hand on her hip. “You can’t rush this.”

“Food is getting cold.”

“Matteo...” she warned.

“I’m not a child. I’m a man whose wife is pissed at him.” My tone was terse and I caught Dad’s warning glare. He tolerated insolence from me, but not when it was directed at Mom. Couldn’t say I blamed him. Now that I had a wife of my own, I would be protective as fuck.

“Pissed is putting it mildly,” Nico interjected.

“Thanks, Captain Obvious,” I muttered. “Maybe it’s a bad idea for you and Dad to come along. It would feel like we’re ganging up on her. I can handle this myself.” It was my fault and mine alone. My eyes narrowed. “Especially since you all seem to like highlighting my shortcomings.”

“She’s alone in this city,” Mom said.

“I beg to disagree. She’s got that hellcat as a bodyguard,” Nico said.

Mom ignored my brother. “It’s important to show that we’re fair so coming home to the house will be more appealing.”

We resumed walking.

“No one is suggesting she should sleep in another room,” I warned. “My wife sleeps with me.”

Even when their faces were turned away from me I could feel the smirks coming from the guys, and the eye roll coming from Mom.

I was antsy as fuck. I’d never had Sera pissed at me this way, and I didn’t like the feeling of not being in control.

It didn’t take us long to make it to Jabbin’ Java. Nico held the door open while Mom and I walked in.

I spotted Sera at one of the communal tables. Trevor and a few of our Arrows were joining us. Hell’s Kitchen was on red alert. On our way here, I spotted a couple of our guys keeping watch.

Renz met us in the entryway. After giving Mom a peck on the cheek, he grabbed the takeout bags from me.

“Smells good,” he said. “I’m going to re-plate them.”

“It’s bacon.” I was hoping food would put the spark back into my wife’s eyes. She was seated at the head of the table with Ivy at her side and Liz on the other. My sister-in-law nodded at the seat beside her.

My mouth tightened. Fine. It was too much to hope that I would be seated right beside Sera. Her shields were up like I’d never seen before.

I was at a loss. I was all for having it out with Sera but now I couldn’t even touch her, and I didn’t know where to start.

“Here, looks like you need coffee.” Liz filled my cup from a carafe. I wanted an espresso, but I didn’t want to seem picky.

I took a sip of the brew and winced. This tasted a lot like humility.

“Thank you.” I was in an unusual situation. This was no business deal I could finesse with words or an opponent I could bulldoze to get my way.

Sera was my wife. I set a precedent for deceit since our relationship was built on a lie.

The challenge was to convince her our marriage was real. But I was getting the feeling she already had one foot out the door. And as much as my default behavior was to take charge and tell her everything was as it was, that would be another lie.

We lost something last night.

But it wasn't lost forever.

She was still here. I hadn't heard from Luca, so she hadn't told him either.

That gave me hope. The last thing I needed was for her trigger-happy uncle to interfere.

Renz set the bacon and eggs in front of Sera and Liz. For Ivy, it was French toast and bacon. My youngest brother took his seat beside Ivy and announced, "Your orders will come out soon."

"We could've just eaten from the takeout containers," Sera said.

"Oh, no," Renz said. "It's rare we get the family together like this. Nico and Matteo are always on a health kick, and they don't eat greasy breakfast stuff like normal people."

"Taking care of the six-pack, bro," Nico bragged.

Ivy snorted into her coffee.

Nico raised a brow. "What, you don't believe I have one?"

"Oh, please," Ivy said. "It's none of my business."

"We do have Sunday dinner once a month," Mom pointed out. "It's getting harder nowadays with Bianca away at college, and my two boys taking over De Lucci Transnational."

"You have more of me though." Dad winked.

I could get a toothache from my parents' bantering. It had gotten worse since my dad turned over the reins and seemed to

be my mom's shadow. I noticed Sera watching my parents with a wistful look on her face.

Dad whispered something to Mom and her eyes widened. "Behave, Cesar. You're embarrassing the kids."

"Not kids anymore, Mom," Renz said. "By the way, your favorite grandchild is in the apartment. Good luck prying her away from her Saturday morning cartoons."

"She's watching too much TV," Dad said.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Mom replied. "All the McGraths turned out all right, right?"

"That's debatable," Dad replied.

"Your parents are cute," Ivy said.

Sera looked at her friend sharply, and as if remembering that we were the enemy, Ivy stared at her plate and continued eating. That pissed me off. My family was not part of the deceit.

I sipped my coffee to rein in my chaotic thoughts. I was letting them go rampant in all directions and not in a good way.

What the fuck was I going to do?

It's day one, asshole. Chill.

"So, what do you want to do today?" I ventured, picking up a strip of bacon from the plate that Renz's staff lowered in front of me.

All conversation ceased at the table.

I inwardly groaned. Could my family be more obvious?

Sera's face turned red, but she finally met my eyes. "I don't know."

That was a loaded answer. I ached to reach across the table and take her hand. To assure her I would make things right. For a second, her shields fell and the vulnerability on her face made my chest ache even more.

I would make this right. I would beg on my knees for her to forgive me, but knowing Sera, it would take more than that to make up for the lie.

But first, I needed to get her away from Ivy and my family so we could talk.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

SERA

After breakfast, we headed to the back of the building. The Jaguar was parked there. However, I wasn't sure if I wanted to go home with Matteo, but what alternative did I have? I avoided answering a text from Luca this morning because I might end up begging my uncle to come get me.

And then he would ask questions.

And then I'd have to come clean because my mind was too numb to plan what to tell him. One needed their wits about them when talking to Luca. He could smell bullshit over the phone. Besides, I couldn't guarantee what my uncle would do to Matteo. I promised myself I'd keep my relationship issues from my uncle after what had happened to my college boyfriend.

"Are you sure you should drive?"

"I did yesterday."

"Did you sleep well?" He had circles under his eyes, and unlike yesterday when he was hundred percent, today I wasn't oblivious that he had a lot of things on his mind.

Stopping at the passenger side, Matteo put a hand on where the roof of the car met the door. He leaned forward. "What do you think? And don't feel sympathy for me just because I'm worse for wear."

"It's a natural concern."

“I want you to come home so we can work on our problems.”

I looked at his throat, unwilling to meet his eyes. I didn't want to be swayed by the brilliant blue turbulence and drown in them. I needed to remain steadfast.

When I didn't respond, he opened the door for me and let me in. The car smelled of lemon and leather.

When he got behind the steering wheel, I said, “Did you just wax the car?”

“I couldn't sleep.”

The Jaguar's engine roared to life.

“You're overdoing things.”

“Stop fussing.”

“What's wrong with you?” I snapped. “You used to eat it up when I fussed over you.”

“I don't want your pity, okay? Your tendency to save someone.”

I made a sarcastic sound. “This is not me saving someone. I'm still married to you.”

He reversed the sports car and peeled away from the alley. “Are you saying we'll be staying married?”

“It will be a marriage of convenience.” No way was I trusting my feelings again.

He cursed under his breath.

“I don't want that. I was wrong to keep it from you, Sera, but I didn't want to ruin what we're building.”

“Why didn't you admit it before you wanted it to become real?”

“You would have been pissed at me or wouldn't have given me a chance.”

He was probably right, but still.

“You don’t have a choice in this matter. If you want me to stay married to you we won’t be as we were before.”

“What exactly will change?”

“Besides no intimacy?”

He jerked his head my way, just when I spied a bike messenger hurtling across the intersection. “Watch out!”

He hit the brakes hard and groaned. I slammed my hands on the dashboard. “Oh my God.” I turned to face him.

Matteo was pale under his tan.

“Are you all right?”

“In a minute,” he gritted, but adjusted the seat belt.

“Maybe we should go to the hospital.”

“I’m fine.”

“Matteo.”

“I’m. Fine,” he enunciated. “I want to take you home.”

Someone rapped on the window.

Matteo cursed again but lowered the driver’s side window.

“You okay, boss?” Trevor asked.

“Yes.”

“You want me to drive?”

“No.”

Something on Matteo’s face made the other man back off.

My husband looked in the rearview mirror. “Not a word to my brothers. I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Trevor nodded and walked away.

“I hardly think they’ll make fun of your injury. What if you re-lacerated your liver?”

“I doubt it. It’s protected by muscle.”

“You probably atrophied by now.”

“Sera,” he growled. “Let’s talk at home, okay?”

I didn't want to argue with him anymore. His condition was frustrating the hell out of him. Because, like him, I was sure he didn't want me faking my real feelings about the situation.

We arrived at the house with not much fanfare. We didn't talk in the vehicle. My husband did what he did best and brooded. He'd curse occasionally at traffic. I was sure he was trying his best to concentrate on driving to prove he was okay.

I was tempted to ask if he was hurting, but I bit my tongue. Now was not the time to coddle him. He didn't park in the garage but in front of the mansion.

Side by side, we walked silently. Past the grand entryway and up the sweeping staircase, turning in the direction of the west wing rooms.

Matteo was doing better. He didn't need any help putting on clothes. He hardly winced anymore when he bent at the waist.

Upon entering our room, I headed directly to the closet and pulled out one of the suitcases.

"What are you doing?" he finally spoke.

I swung the suitcase on the bed and unzipped it, flinging the top open, and then walked to the dresser. "Moving to the next bedroom."

"My wife sleeps with me."

With an armful of lounge clothes and pajamas, I said, "No, I'm not."

He rubbed a brow before gesturing to me. "Baby, don't do this. How are we going to fix—"

"I can't even look that far." I dumped the clothes into the luggage and faced him. "Give me a chance to absorb what happened, okay? We can't fix this if I can't sort out what's real and what's not."

He took a step toward me and grabbed my elbows, hauling me to him. "How can you say these past few weeks were not real? I have a hole through me to prove it."

“Don’t,” I begged, trying to stay strong. “You don’t want to use your injury as a reason for me to stay.”

“No,” he said grimly. “I don’t want that. But what I’m saying is, everything that we went through, you being there for me, that’s real.”

“I know. For me it was.” I crossed my arms and brought them down to break his hold. “But that was built on something that wasn’t.”

“Sera...”

“Answer me this...” It had been nagging at my mind and I was afraid to ask for the answer, but my instinct was telling me to get it out of the way. “When did you find out Gustavo was giving me the remaining shares?”

“Baby...”

“When?”

He couldn’t look at me. “Nico told me on our way back from Maine.”

I expected it, but a distressed whimper escaped my mouth. “Before you asked me to marry you at the vineyard?” I exhaled heavily to strengthen my resolve. I’d cried enough. “Matteo, I’m asking you now. If there’s any chance of saving us...please give me space.”

“I can’t let you leave the house.”

“I know,” I said. “If it wasn’t for the Santino threat, I could have moved back to the Brooklyn home.”

Matteo’s mouth flattened as he contemplated my words.

“Be thankful I haven’t told Luca.”

“This is between you and me. Enough people know about this bullshit.”

That pissed me off. “A bullshit you and Daniel perpetuated.”

“I was wrong. I should have told you before we got married.” He blew out a breath. “Can we move on from that?”

Just..." He took a step toward me, but I recoiled. He scowled, his hands gesturing helplessly. "Just...tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"That's the thing, Matteo." I turned away from him because I couldn't stand the desperation on his face. He probably didn't even know that was how he looked. If there was something I knew about my husband, he didn't want to look vulnerable. I'd witnessed it enough since he'd been shot. That was why this was so difficult for me. I empathized with his situation but when was enough, enough?

Our time in Maine was the most romantic of my lifetime. The cliffside declaration, telling him about my parents. But come to think of it, that was more about courtship. I shared so much about myself and he didn't. He had several opportunities to come clean about Daniel and Gustavo's shares, but he didn't. If he had just done so before he married me, maybe I would have been more forgiving.

We said vows to each other.

Would that be grounds for an annulment? Married under false pretenses? I escaped to the closet where I could lean against the inner wall, suddenly lightheaded. Did I want to sever my relationship to Matteo forever?

Anxiety sent my heart racing.

Too much.

Too much to process.

Too much to absorb.

I pretended to gather my clothes, taking that time to calm down, and took a deep breath before I exited the closet.

Matteo was sitting at the edge of the bed, glaring at the contents of my suitcase.

"You're just moving to the next room," he said. "Why can't you just come in here and get your stuff when you need it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "There might be times I don't want to see you at all."

“I don’t like sleeping without you.”

I squared my shoulders. “You’ll get used to it.”

His scowl deepened. “What are you saying? That this will be permanent?”

“I don’t know.” I wanted to stomp my feet. “Just...just back off, okay?”

Something in my face must have told him he was pushing me to the edge of my limit.

He stood and walked to the door. “I’ll be in the study. I’m not about to help you move out of our room.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to.”

His face became a blank mask. He nodded, opened the door, and walked out.



“Are you sure you’re ready to go to the office?”

“I’m fine.” Matteo didn’t look at me. He didn’t smile. He insisted on driving me to Hell’s Kitchen before he headed to De Lucci Transnational. I could have caught a ride with his mom, but he said Mrs. De Lucci had plans with his dad. Matteo didn’t look too good at breakfast this morning. He wasn’t pale, but the circles around his eyes were deeper, and I was starting to feel guilty. How could he make a full recovery if he wasn’t sleeping enough?

I didn’t have a very restful sleep either, but I wasn’t about to admit that I didn’t like sleeping without him. I would get used to it. I must.

My heart ached at the thought that I was fully in a marriage of convenience. I shouldn’t care too much about my husband’s well-being, but I couldn’t help it. Did that make me gullible and a doormat?

I needed to talk to Ivy. She was meeting me at Jabbin’ Java. Maybe Liz could weigh in too, but somehow I felt there

was a world of difference between Matteo and Renz and could offer nothing. I still didn't know what went on between the brothers. Something obviously did. I asked Matteo about it one time, but he shut down.

"I can hear you thinking," he said.

"Do you want to know what's on my mind?" I challenged.

He cursed beneath his breath. "Of course I do."

I turned to face him, leaning against the door. "I was thinking how I've told you so much about myself, and yet I know so little about you."

He frowned. "I've been open about my family."

"Not what happened between you and Renz, which still seems to affect your relationship."

He stared straight ahead, not answering.

I gave him a few seconds, then I faced forward. "Figures."

"What happened between me and Renz," he finally said. "Wasn't my proudest moment."

"We learn from our mistakes, Matteo."

He exhaled a deep breath. "What mistake? That I should be looking out for my brother? That I think he's throwing away his future when he has the opportunity to go to college."

"College isn't everything."

"You're one to talk, Miss Magna Cum Laude."

"I'm not talking about me. It's something I wanted to pursue," I said. "Your brother looks happy."

"He does."

"Matteo..."

"Ask me something else."

"Okay. Why is it so important for you to go to the office? You've proven you can work from home."

"Mrs. Mancini wants a face-to-face. I don't want her stepping foot in the mansion."

“That’s the winery, right?”

He glanced at me then. “How do you know about the winery?”

“The night of the dinner party...before Dom dropped the news that Santino has taken over the Galluzo.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“You told me not to worry about it.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“You sounded condescending.”

We were at a stoplight. This time he cast me a longish stare full of bewilderment. “How?”

“First of all, you closed the lid on your laptop. And second, you told me not to worry my pretty little head.”

“Baby, I didn’t mean to sound condescending at all. You’ve given so much of yourself taking care of me. I didn’t want you busying yourself with all the business bullshit.”

“Business bullshit when you yourself said that I was Miss Magna Cum Laude,” I said. “Why would I kill myself going through grad school and getting those grades if I didn’t intend to do anything with them? I’m not asking you for a job, but at least don’t put me in a box as a wife who simply takes care of your needs. Can’t I inquire about your day or the work you do when you know full well I have the background to understand it?”

The light turned green and the Jaguar crawled forward. “Sera—”

“And in case you’ve forgotten, I did my thesis on—”

“The modernization of olive oil production,” he sighed. “Baby...” His voice was full of apology. “I’m so sorry. And I’m not saying that to score points in winning you back. I’m thanking you for calling me on my bullshit. That’s what I want you to do.”

What do I say to that? I couldn’t help thinking he was conceding my point to win points with me, but then again, I

could tell when my husband was sincere.

I nodded my answer.

His right hand was on the gear. Usually, our fingers would be intertwined and he'd use his hand on the wheel for shifting gears. I ached for that part of us.

Soon, the Jaguar arrived in the back of the building.

"I'll pick you up before three," he said.

"You're not working a full day?"

"I don't have to."

"And if I have plans?"

He frowned. "With whom?"

"With Ivy."

He didn't look happy. "I don't want you to be around Daniel."

I rolled my eyes. "That ship has sailed."

"It's not even that. I don't trust him not to mess with your head."

"I'm not trusting anything out of his mouth either, so no worries there." I pushed my door open.

I heard his door open too before he called, "Sera."

I turned.

"About Renz. I need to talk to him first, all right?"

It did not occur to me that it might be a situation where Matteo wasn't free to talk about it to protect his brother's privacy.

"Oh my God." I put a hand to my mouth. "I didn't mean..." I took a step toward him. "If you can't...oh, Matteo..." I ended up saying lamely.

His eyes softened. "It's not that, baby. There are some things that my brother and I ignored for so long...things that we both lived with without fixing, until someone else asked us about it."

I huffed a laugh. “Someone as nosy as me.”

“It’s warranted. You’re my wife.”

I didn’t say yay or nay, but gave him a small smile and wave before I punched in the code to get inside the building.

CHAPTER

Thirty

SERA

“Let me get this straight. You had to rig the door with a chair so your husband couldn’t sneak into the room?”

Ivy and I were in a booth toward the back of the café. The morning rush was influx and we both kept out of the way while nursing our coffees. She resumed her keto coffee mornings and hadn’t eaten anything.

“Well, yeah.” I pushed the unfinished cappuccino out of the way. My stomach was too sour from all the stress this problem with Matteo was causing.

“How sure are you he won’t respect your privacy?”

“Because he’s done it before.”

“What? When? After the nightclub?”

“No. In Maine.” I told her about that incident before we headed to the cliffs.

Her eyes were narrowed, assessing. “You told me about him taking you to the cliffs. You didn’t tell me about him watching you sleep.”

“I’m telling you now as my witness,” I said dryly.

“So you’ll have a record of your husband’s stalkerish behavior?”

I chewed my bottom lip. “He’s intense, right?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Who’s intense?” a voice asked behind us.

I looked over my shoulder at Renz. “Who else? Your brother.”

Sliding my butt around the bench of the booth so I could face him, I asked, “Any advice?”

“How to handle a De Lucci in full obsession?” he chuckled. “Talk to my wife or mom. But later.” He jerked his chin toward the kitchen. “I need a guinea pig.”

My curiosity piqued. Maybe this sour stomach was from hunger and not anxiety. I was trying not to fall into the eating-while-depressed state, but it had been three hours since breakfast. It was okay for second breakfast, right? I stood. “I *am* hungry. What are you baking?” I looked at Ivy. She didn’t need any prodding even when she was muttering, “I’m on keto.”

Renz barked a laugh. “You’re in the wrong place.” Then looking over our heads, he said, “Babe, the savory brioche is almost ready.”

“I’ll be right there!”

My friend griped in my ear, “I guess I could cheat.”

“I can hear your stomach.” I squinted at her. “Are you starving yourself?”

“Hardly. And it’s called fasting.”

I wanted to explain the concept of fasting to her, but decided it wasn’t worth the argument when we were about to eat carbs. We hooked our elbows together and marched side by side, following Renz.

The aroma of baking bread invoked nostalgia of the French bakery beside the Italian restaurant I visited often as a child. I wondered if that was how my love of croissants came about.

“What are you testing?” I asked.

The kitchen had several aluminum worktables. One of them had a marble top where a baking sheet sat with dough

shaped into individual rings.

“I smell bacon.” But I didn’t see bacon. My expression must have fallen because Renz gave an amused shake of his head.

“Well, how long will this take to cook?”

“The natives are hungry,” Ivy agreed.

“I thought you were on keto,” Renz reminded her.

“That was before I crossed the threshold of this kitchen,” she shot back.

“Is it in the oven?” The aroma of bacon and fresh bread was making saliva pool under my tongue.

“Wow, you girls are really hungry.”

Ivy and I crossed our arms and stared at Renz.

He bit his bottom lip and gave a wry smile that showed he was pleased with our excitement yet wary that we were impatient. Obviously, he had experience with hangry women. “Two more minutes.”

I looked around the empty kitchen. “Are you here by yourself? I swore I saw a lady with pink hair earlier.”

“I have two bakers,” he said. “You saw Becca. She and Ramirez come in at three a.m. to start work on the morning pastry.”

“That’s early,” I said in awe. I knew bakeries had early hours, but three a.m. was REM sleep for me.

“Everything is fresh every day,” he said proudly, walking over to the oven to take a peek at whatever he had baking in there.

My business brain kicked in. “Do you have leftovers?”

“We do, but very minimal, and that usually gets sold off after lunchtime or before five. On Fridays we make more to last until five p.m., then we sell it half price.”

“To bring in new customers,” I said. “Those who are unwilling to pay seven dollars for a breakfast bread are given a

chance to try it at a lower cost.”

“Exactly. There’s little deterioration in taste except this one I’m trying out.”

A buzzer went off.

He grabbed a towel and brought out a tray from the oven to set it in front of us.

At the sight, my appetite heightened.

In a ring of golden bread sat crisp bacon and a sunny-side up egg that was cooked to the right side of gooey.

“Oh, wow!”

“Your desire for hangover food yesterday gave me this idea.” Renz leaned a hip against the counter. I glanced up at him to see satisfaction and contentment etched on his face. This was in contrast to the Broody Brothers of Matteo and Nico in their high-finance jobs of taking over companies.

I could totally see where Renz got it right. He followed his dreams. One would see him as riding the coattails of the De Lucci name, but from what I had determined, he worked hard for himself and his family.

“So you’re an expert baker and barista?”

“I want to be good at three things,” he said. “Family, bread, and coffee. Anything else is secondary.”

“Oh is it ready?” Liz rushed into the kitchen. “It looks perfect, babe. I knew you would get it right.” She gave her husband a kiss before she sat across from us. “Are we going to just stare at it?”

“Well, twenty minutes to cool down.”

“What?” Ivy and I both shrieked.

“Why did you bring us in here, then?”

“It’s the whole experience of getting it from the oven to the table.”

He was bullshitting, so I called him on it, “That’s not the experience you’re giving your customer unless you’re moving

an oven to the front of the house.”

Liz started laughing.

Renz scowled at his wife before turning back to us. “I’m just excited, okay?”

“You want company for staring at this mouthwatering whatever it’s called without offering us a cappuccino?” Ivy asked.

“I thought you only drank keto coffee.” Liz pounced on her statement.

“Woman, I’m ready to eat this sinfully tempting bread. Does keto even figure?” Ivy declared.

“I’ll be right back,” Renz muttered. “Don’t touch the brioche.”

All three of us rolled our eyes.

Then our gazes returned expectantly to the fresh baked goodness before us. To keep our minds off our stomachs, I asked Liz, “Where’s Samantha? School?”

“Mom and Dad got her this morning. There’s an exhibit of old film sets at the MET.” She grinned at me. “If you haven’t picked up on it yet, the McGraths are nuts about cinema.”

“I have,” I said. “Matteo said his grandparents—Cillian and Branna—moved to Hollywood.”

I had met most of the McGraths when they came to visit Matteo at the mansion. For days, there’d been a revolving door of uncles, aunts, and cousins from both sides of his families. I definitely couldn’t match all the names and faces. Matteo had such good genes, not only in looks but in brains.

Renz came back with a tray of our cappuccinos. Ivy and I oohed and aahed over the latte art.

“So...” I shimmied my ass on the kitchen stool. “Can I have a bite?”

He checked his watch. “Five more minutes.”

“You’re like the soup-Nazi of bread.”

“The gluten-Nazi,” Ivy laughed.

“Don’t argue with him,” Liz said. “He’s crazy about his craft. Just give in to it.”

“Does that apply to all De Lucci men?” I quipped. “Just give in.”

“You’ll have to eventually.” Liz winked. “Resistance is futile and all that.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Ivy admonished. “Stay strong.”

“Oh, I am.” I sipped my cappuccino and gave Renz a thumbs up. It was one of the best I’d tasted.

“You need help out there, babe,” Renz addressed Liz. “Have you looked at the applications? It’s the third week of October. The holiday will be in full swing.”

“I know,” Liz sighed. “I’m trying to justify the cost of hiring a full-time employee rather than a seasonal one because it’s so hard to keep on retraining.”

“Plus, you want to keep people you can rely on,” Ivy said.

“So hire one full-time for the front of the house, and the rest as seasonal.”

“We have to think of the leaner months,” she told him.

My mind was churning up ideas, but they weren’t quite making the connection with the bacon and egg brioche in front of me. “So I have an idea, but I really need to take a bite out of this.”

I grabbed one, inhaled the smokiness of the bacon before I took it into my mouth, and immediately went to heaven. Ivy did the same, followed by Liz. All of us started swearing on how good these were.

“No words,” Ivy mumbled around a bite. “This is going to fly off the shelves. This is perfect. You should make hundreds of these to sell a day.”

“It’s good because the egg is still fresh.”

“How long do you think it will have this taste?” I asked.

“An hour or two.”

I shrugged, getting ready to take my third bite. “Don’t compromise on quality. This is New York. People will pay for it.” Luca said there were no bad restaurants in the Big Apple because competition was stiff and New Yorkers were used to the best. Bad ones went out of business in no time because word-of-mouth spread quickly given even taxi drivers were food critics.

I glanced at Ivy who was already creating a video to share with her followers.

“Guys,” she said. “I’m off keto and I regret nothing.” She smiled and then took a prim bite out of her savory brioche which was already half eaten. The yolk smeared her lips, and then she licked it and somehow made it look sexy.

“Free publicity,” Liz gushed.

“Yep,” I agreed.

“Okay, we’re not ready to be mobbed.” Renz cautioned. “I haven’t figured this out for mass production.” Apprehension entered his tone, an edginess I was familiar with having worked with artisans in Napa Valley. To them, craft came first before money. My interest in business procedure was to make sure they could have both.

“Baking is a science though, right?” I said. “You can just scale up.”

“Sure can,” he said.

“Oh, regarding my idea.” I circled back to business. “Are you just worried you might not have enough business after the holidays to justify an FTE?”

“That’s about the gist of it,” Liz said. “I’ve talked to Mom, and she said if there were financial issues, we could float between Eamonn’s and the café.”

“Don’t want that, babe,” her husband said.

“They’re family, Renz. Your mom is just trying to help.”

“We’ll figure this out. We have a new product.” He glanced at Ivy and winked. “And a new publicity machine that will help us sell.”

“Do you have social media presence?” Ivy asked.

“We have one, but we don’t update regularly.”

“We’re talking about FTE,” I said. “Do you cater?”

“Sure we do.”

“How about if I could guarantee a certain number of sandwiches twice a week.” I told him the number and what it was for.

Renz laughed. “I heard this story from Nico.” He cleared his throat. “But—”

“It’s not charity to you,” I said.

“Is it part of my brother’s penance to make it up to you?” he asked, his eyes still full of mirth.

“I’m smiling like a she-devil over here,” Ivy said, still looking at her phone but grabbed my head to give me a kiss. “Mwah. I’m so proud of you. Charge it to his black card.”

“Oh, I’m going to have Renz keep it on file.”

“Damn, I can’t wait to see Matteo’s expression when he finds out,” he said.

“Is he even going to notice it though?” Ivy asked still typing on her phone and then at the same time saying, “Five thousand likes, but people from NYC are asking when.”

“Tell them coming soon,” Liz said.

“Oh, he’ll notice it,” Renz said with an evil grin. “I’ll make sure he will.”

CHAPTER

Thirty-One

MATTEO

A week without Sera in my bed, and I was getting ready to crawl out of my skin. I was sick. Not from my liver injury—I'd recovered from that. Just a twitch of pain here and there. The doctor cleared me for the gym. Light lifting. I should've been happy as fuck, but I wasn't.

I was sick—sick of not having my wife's affection. It was killing me. I didn't sleep well without her. I tried getting in her room the first night, but somehow she'd rigged the door so it wouldn't open. That pissed me off so much, it caused me more sleepless nights.

I was a zombie by morning.

I felt like one.

Sera still accompanied me to my checkups but she didn't coddle me like she used to. I would have been relieved if we weren't in this place of limbo.

And my whole family was conspiring against me.

Renz most especially. He sent me an invoice marked paid for the goods Sera ordered for the Merciful Sisters of St. Rita charity. That was the other thing that had been occupying my wife in the last week. She didn't even ask if I wanted to come and help her. She brought Trevor. Granted, he was her assigned bodyguard, but it still pissed me off.

Everything about this was pissing me off.

I screeched into the parking space behind Jabbin' Java. I got out of the vehicle, getting ready to have it out with my brother. If this was a leftover grudge from five years ago, then it was time we faced it. No way was he fucking over my chances of reconciling with my wife.

I found him in the kitchen.

He was taking out a sheet pan from the oven and I tried to ignore how good it smelled. My stomach had been queasy since the night Sera found out the truth about my scheme with Daniel.

Renz smirked when he saw me.

I tossed the printout of the invoice. "You're rubbing this in my face, huh?"

"Trying to get your attention."

"For what?"

He crossed his arms. "I don't like to see you floundering. I've decided to give you a hand."

"Don't do me any favors."

"Fuck you," he said, but there was no heat on his face or in his words, just sympathy. It made me feel worse. "You drop Sera off here almost every morning and you couldn't find time in your day to find out what she's doing?"

"She doesn't want me anywhere near her." My voice rose.

"So you've given up on your marriage?"

My fists clenched. "I'm giving her space," I roared.

Liz walked into the kitchen. "Tone it down. People can hear you on the floor."

"Sorry."

"Sorry, babe."

Liz looked at me and then at my brother. "It's way past time you two put what happened behind you."

Then she walked out.

Renz stared at me.

I stared at him.

He whipped out his phone and shot off a text. Afterwards, he said, “Come on.”

“Where?”

He didn’t answer but walked into the café and told Liz, “I’ll be on the rooftop with Matteo. Becca will be in at ten. The muffins are fresh from the oven.”

“Got it.” Liz gave me a look I couldn’t decipher.

Without waiting to see if I was following him, Renz pushed out the side entry door that led into the building’s hallway. There, we ran into Dad walking out of The Grindhouse boxing gym.

Shit.

He raised a brow. “Where are you boys off to?”

“He’s helping me winterize the plants,” Renz said.

Dad fixed the towel he had around his neck and dabbed at his forehead. “I’ll walk you guys up.”

“Dad,” I said tightly. “This is between Renz and me.”

“I left my gym stuff at the apartment,” he told us as all three of us headed up the stairs. “I’m waiting for Ava and Sam to come back from the park.”

I knew Liz and Renz decided to keep my niece home since possible threats from Santino still loomed. Keeping an eye on the youngest in school would have been hard. Last we’d heard about the state of the Galluzo leadership, Santino was meeting resistance from Vincenzo’s supporters. Gustavo had also gone to ground. Dom told me the bloody skirmishes between the two sides had spilled to the streets and in broad daylight that the Italian government and the general public were taking notice. Something the rest of the underworld didn’t want and why the Archer Syndicate existed.

“Thanks for watching out for Sam. The season is getting busy,” Renz said, then glancing my way, he added, “That’s

largely in part to your wife and Ivy, by the way.”

“If you want to expand Jabbin’ Java, let me know,” Dad said. “Your mom and Sera were talking about it the other night.”

“This is the first I’ve heard about it,” I muttered. I was glad at least that Sera hadn’t shut out my family.

“You were at the office,” Dad said.

When we reached the third floor, Dad paused at the apartment doorway. “I have some things to say to you myself —”

“Dad, if this is about the Mancini situation—”

“You will listen,” he told me in a voice he hadn’t used in a long time, letting me know it brooked no argument. He was still Cesar De Lucci, a man feared and respected by the underworld and above it. “I’ll come find you guys later.”

He didn’t wait for my reply and entered the apartment, shutting the door.

Renz and I stared at the closed door. Then we looked at each other.

“This better not be some kind of intervention,” I said.

“I don’t know, bro, do you need one?”

We went up the stairs that led to the roof.

“I don’t need one. I know what I’m doing, especially with the Mancini thing. Dad is letting his friendship with them color his judgment.”

My brother pushed the rooftop door open, letting us through.

We walked over to where a couple of pots sat in the middle of raised beds.

My brother gave me a pointed look. “Can you manage twenty pounds?”

“I can fucking carry more,” I answered. “I’ve been cleared to go back to the gym.”

“Sera is okay with that?”

“If she’s not, I wouldn’t know,” I said testily. “She doesn’t give a damn what I do now apparently.”

“Move that one.” Renz nodded to the rosemary bush while he lifted the bigger one, eyeing my suit. “You should change into something else.”

“I’m fine.” I did, however, shed my jacket, and rolled up my sleeves.

“What exactly are you doing to fix things between you two,” he asked.

“She won’t talk to me.” I lifted one of the pots. Then I remembered what she asked me. “Well, scratch that. She said she’s tired of opening up about herself and too guarded to ask me for more.”

Renz didn’t say anything. He returned to his planters and instructed me to help move them closer to the wall surrounding the stairs. On our third round trip, I spotted the hand-truck that was leaning against one of the raised beds. “Couldn’t you have used that?”

“It’s good exercise. What’s the matter? You don’t wanna get your hands dirty?”

“You’ve seen me with the Jaguar.”

“Waxing your precious sports car and polishing the leather is different from getting your hands in good old dirt.”

“I’ve changed basic parts under its hood.” I ignored his reference to soil because fuck him if he thought I should be like him. “I don’t mind grimy hands.”

“Good,” he said. “Liz wants one of the raised beds to have tulips. Plant those bulbs in the corner. That’s not too hard for you, right?”

“Stop with the sarcasm and stop with the hedging. Why exactly are we up here? What’s the point? Are you going to help me figure out what I need to do with my marriage or not?”

Renz sighed.

“What’s that sigh for?”

“Brother,” he said. “I’m trying to help you figure things out, but you’re not helping yourself if you’re not willing to stop questioning everything I’m asking you to do because what I’m going to challenge you with is a lot harder than planting bulbs in a raised bed.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re not pulling a Yoda-Luke on me, are you?”

Renz barked a laugh. “Maybe.” He clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Must be hard taking advice from me.”

My eyes slitted further. “What do you mean?”

Renz gave another annoying deep exhalation. He looked into the distance before returning his gaze to mine. “Because I’m younger. Because you think you’re the older brother who should know what’s right for everyone.”

“That’s not true. I asked you what I should do that night Sera found out.”

“Grudgingly.”

I dragged a hand down my face. “Okay. Maybe.”

He propped a shoulder against the wall. “What do you think of my rooftop garden?”

“That’s a trick question, right?”

“And there, I think, is another one of your problems.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I think Dad might be better to talk to about it.”

“You’ve talked to Dad about me?”

“No. But I’ve discerned enough from conversations between you, Nico, and Dad,” he said. “But just to clue you in a bit...not everyone is out to get you.”

I wanted to retort, but it made me stop and think. Was Renz telling me that I was imagining the prejudice I felt with

the older Italians? Fuck that. But I didn't want to argue with him about this.

“And I didn't need a college degree to see that,” he added, eyeing me carefully. And there it was, the conflict that had been festering between us. “Do you love Sera?”

I was a coward. That night before everything went to shit, I was finally going to say the three words that were still missing from our marriage. The three words I needed to hear from her too.

“Dammit, Matteo, you've never told her, have you?”

“Before I proposed, I admitted I might be falling in love.”

He shook his head. “And after? Why are you so fucking stubborn?”

“Let's just say, I'm not as impulsive as you.”

“Oh?” He crossed his arms. “We're digging up that thing now, are we? All right. What was it that you told me that started this whole shit between us?”

I forced those damning and, now, stupid words from my mouth. “I told you you were too young to know what love is. And you're using the De Lucci myth to explain your recklessness.”

“Recklessness? Or my raging hormones that got Liz pregnant?”

The words continued to spill out of my mouth. “I told you you didn't have to marry her and you punched me.”

There had been a brawl. I had insulted the woman he loved. It took Nico and Dad to pull him off me. It didn't end there. “I'm sorry I called Liz a gold digger.”

My chest was suddenly too tight—as though I was having a heart attack. Through the years I'd seen how my unfair assessment of Liz was way off the mark. Renz was the lucky one. Despite what she had gone through because of us, she was so forgiving and sweet yet so strong. “If I could take back those words. If anyone insulted Sera, I don't know if I'd let that person live.”

“You’re lucky you were my brother or I would have buried you six feet in the ground.”

I stared at my shoes. “I just wanted you to go to college.”

“I know. You were looking out for me and I was too bullheaded to see where you were coming from.” He put his hand on my shoulder. In this moment, he was the one with wisdom, and I was the one floundering, not knowing how to win back the woman I loved. “Have you forgiven yourself?”

My eyes lifted and connected with his serious ones. “I thought I had, but every time I see Liz’s limp—”

“We were both at fault. Dad didn’t want me to leave the security of the De Luccis when things were so hot with Caruso.”

“But I’d been such an asshole...” I scrubbed my face. “Forgive me, Lorenzo,” I said. “I don’t think I ever apologized.”

He gave me a sad smile. “We both had to live and learn. I was barely eighteen, and you were twenty-three. Your mind was on education and continuing our legacy and my goals were so far from it. I think that was why Dad and Mom didn’t force us to fix our shit. We had to learn to do it in our own time. I had to prove that I did the right thing by sticking up for the woman I loved.”

“I don’t think I ever told you, and maybe I was in denial,” I said. “But seeing what you’ve done to this place? I’m so proud of you.”

“Well, shit.” His face split into a grin. “Forget the tulip bulbs. Let’s have a beer and celebrate.”

“It’s ten in the morning.”

“What, you’d rather talk to Dad?”

“We’re in the process of airing out our shit anyway, might as well get it out of the way.”

My brother’s grin grew wider. “I have an idea.”

“I was not expecting to have my elbows deep in dirt,” Dad muttered.

He was exaggerating, of course, but Renz got him to bring us beer as well as hoodwinked him into helping us plant these blasted bulbs and winterize his garden. Honestly, college degree or not, my brother had the negotiating skills of a De Lucci.

“You boys got your issues squared away?” my father continued as he pushed one tulip bulb into the soil.

“You can say that,” Renz said. “Why do you think we’re drinking beer this early?”

Dad wiped a brow. “Because it’s goddamn hot up here. It’s weird to be winterizing.”

“It’s only for today,” my brother said. “We’ve been in a deep freeze this past week and the upcoming week is looking the same. Stop arguing, old man. You’re as argumentative as this one here.”

“Hey, don’t rock the boat.”

“How are you and Sera doing, son?” Dad asked suddenly. “I didn’t see any thaw at breakfast this morning.”

“He’s giving her space.” Renz’s mouth twitch with suppressed amusement.

Dad and my youngest brother exchanged a look.

“What?” I gritted. “That’s the right thing to do.”

“How’s that working for you?” Dad asked in a tone that didn’t leave any doubt he expected it not to be working.

I held back an expletive and said instead, “Are you saying I shouldn’t have allowed Sera to sleep in another room?”

“Space is fine.” Dad took a swig from his beer. “But in the meantime, what are you doing to win her back?”

“It’s hard to win her back when she’s not receptive.” Every time I repeated that statement, the ache in my chest manifested into physical pain. “She has it in her mind that all that

transpired between us was built on lies, therefore, all that we're feeling right now can't be trusted."

"Have you made an effort?"

"Of course I have, but things she wanted to know wasn't things I was ready to share...but." I dug a hole in the dirt, plopped a bulb in it, and glanced at Renz. "I wasn't ready to talk to her about what happened between you, Liz, and me because that wasn't my proudest moment." But the next breath I exhaled made me feel lighter.

"Then she's a godsend," Dad said. He rose and moved to the shaded area by the stairwell and slid down to take a seat against the wall. He waved the beer bottle between the two of us. "Both of you made mistakes. It took a lot from Ava and me not to interfere because we thought in time the issues would work themselves out. And it did, but admittedly, it was at a level where things weren't back to where they used to be. I'm not sure if they ever will be, but this..." He pointed at me. "You, Matteo, needed to feel exactly what Renz feels for Liz. That's something you won't understand until you have someone like Sera to show you."

"I fucked it up, Dad," I said. "She's been avoiding me when it's just the two of us." Sera would show up for breakfast at the sunroom. She halted all relationship talk on the drive to Jabbin' Java. That was the only time I had her to myself and the only condition I would never bend on. I would pick her up at times, but there were days when she would make an excuse to go home with Trevor. They were mostly the days she spent at the soup kitchen and I was too caught up at work. I worried that would become a repeated excuse so she could continue avoiding me and I would lose the chance to see her in the evenings. "By the way, she didn't like me freezing her out when she saw that Mancini report." I glared at my dad. "I'm telling you, that deal was cursed from the start."

"I wanted to talk to you about that," he sighed.

"What is there to talk about?" I argued. "They couldn't come up with a good business plan. I have a developer lined up ready to pay top dollar for the land."

“It’s your call, but that vineyard has been in the family for over fifty years.”

I was getting frustrated with my father. “We’ve gone over this a few times. It’s simply not profitable. Mrs. Mancini was asking—no—demanding for another loan like we’re her checking account. They’ve been given two years more than what we’ve given other companies. So what else do you want me to do?”

“So it hasn’t sunk in.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Why do you think I kept insisting you give her a chance?”

“To piss me off.”

“No. To face your prejudice.”

My head reared back. “I’m prejudiced?”

“Son, what happened when you just started in the business...what you perceived as a snub in dealing with you had nothing to do with you being half Italian but everything to do with your lack of experience at that time.” I was about to argue when Dad fixed me with his stare. My mouth tightened and I continued to listen. “You rode too much on the De Lucci name, thinking it would automatically open doors for you. You got too cocky and I mistakenly thought my friends who were my business associates would give you a chance knowing that I was behind you.” He smiled briefly. “I had every faith in you and maybe I’d been too cocky too because you’ve done nothing but try to learn the ins and outs of the business since you were eighteen. Maybe I put too much pressure on you.”

“You’ve never told me this before.”

“Because I refused to see it,” he replied. “Don’t get me wrong, I agree with most of your decisions, and I’d probably agree with the Mancini account as much as it would put a strain on almost fifty years of friendship between our families. But this thing with Gustavo affects you. His prejudice with you has nothing to do with you being half Italian but more of the reputation you’ve acquired in the past few years, especially in his business circles.”

The Raptor of Commercial Real Estate.

I was aware that several of the takeover deals I had overseen had been friends of Gustavo.

When I didn't say anything, Dad shook his head and gave a wave of his hand. "Your mom feels the same as you, by the way, regarding Mancini."

My mouth curved. "At least I'm not imagining it."

"All I'm saying, Matteo, is in this business, there's a difference between greed and need."

"Greed is good."

"Don't spew the Gordon Gekko bullshit."

"I know, Dad." Mom was passionate about the teaching moments of the *Wall Street* movie. She told us to think very hard before taking away a person's livelihood. Was it because of need or greed?

Greed was when you wanted more to the detriment of others.

Greed was when you had so much of something but you felt it was never enough.

Hunger on the other hand was a need. Hunger was a need to satisfy something elemental to your existence.

I hungered for Sera.

I needed her for my survival.

I loved her.

"How do I get my wife back?"

Dad's brows rose and then his face softened, but before he could say anything, Renz cut in, "How soon do you want things to get back to normal?"

"Is that even a question? As soon as possible." I felt like I was functioning without a limb or a beating heart. I was dead inside. "But at the rate I'm going, it's not looking very good." I drained my beer and sat beside my dad so we were both facing Renz. I twirled the empty bottle on the cement floor.

“Find out what makes her happy.”

I smiled faintly. “Lobster rolls.”

“Seriously, bro, is that all you know about her?”

“The charity she supports is close to her own need to save her uncle’s soul.”

Renz looked at me strangely, whereas Dad chuckled, indicating he understood this particular oxymoronic behavior related to crime families.

“Then that’s what you need to understand, son,” Dad said. “You know what she likes to eat. You know her passion for charities that might be related to her guilt of belonging to the Moretti crime family.”

Renz was still staring at me strangely. “You made her fall for you in three weeks. You married her.” He let those words hang before adding, “You can do it again.”

“With how this is going, it might take months. She has so much confusion about what’s real and what’s fake.”

“Do you have the patience for that?”

“Honestly? I’m losing my damn mind.”

“I have a radical suggestion,” Renz said.

“I’m all for any suggestions.”

“You’re not gonna like it.”

“How is it worse than my current situation?”

“Oh, it’s going to be worse.”

I frowned at my brother. “Lay it on me.”

He told me.

It was worse.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

SERA

I walked into the kitchen and stopped.

Matteo's broad back was hunched over the stovetop sautéing a mix of greens and reds, but I smelled onion and garlic and my mouth watered. He had on an athletic shirt over gray sweatpants and his favorite high-top sneakers.

"Didn't expect you home," I said.

He glanced at me and flashed me his megawatt smile. "Oh, hi, baby. I decided the office could do without me. It's a Friday night after all. How did it go at St. Catherine's?"

"It went well." I peeled off my jacket and went to the fridge to get a bottled water.

"I hope you don't mind a healthy dinner tonight," he said to the pan. "The pot roast last night made me feel heavy today."

A whiff of alarm snaked up my spine. "Are you all right? Do you feel nauseous?"

"I'm fine." He winked at me. "Thanks for asking."

Matteo had been acting strange ever since that day Renz sent him the invoice of the first two days we'd spent at St. Catherine's. We provided artisanal sandwiches or bread to the soup kitchen twice a week, Mondays and Fridays. I expected my husband to confront me that night, but his broodiness

seemed to disappear and he'd been smiling at dinner that evening with his parents.

That was two nights ago.

When I tried to pry information out of Renz, he refused to reveal what the brothers discussed.

I knew Cesar and Ava were catching a premier of a new movie tonight, so I hurried home in hopes I could beat my husband back to the house and in the kitchen to grab what I needed and hide in my room. It was a bit immature, but it hadn't been two weeks since I discovered his subterfuge, so I felt justified in making him stew in his sins.

I'd done my duty of inquiring after his health this morning, and since obviously he just returned from the gym, he was okay.

"If you don't mind, I'll just..."

He turned to me. "Sit."

I didn't care for his tone at all. "Excuse me?"

"I do not excuse you. This has gone on long enough and we're going to discuss our marriage like adults."

A steeliness sharpened his voice to a honed edge and it cut right through me, so I parried, "I don't know what you have to say that would change the fact that you married me under false pretenses."

"You know what? I'm getting tired of hearing that excuse of yours just to avoid talking to me." He pointed at the barstool behind the kitchen counter. "We're not getting formal with this. So sit down."

"I don't have lobster," he added. "I have broiled chicken breast which should be about...dammit." Smoke billowed out of the oven and he turned the kitchen exhaust to high before it reached the smoke detectors.

I sat on the barstool and poured myself a glass of wine from a bottle that was already uncorked. I whipped out my phone. "Should I order pizza?"

He glared at me.

I burst out laughing.

I checked the app for Neapolitan pizza. I was in the mood for it for sure and it went with the wine.

Matteo dumped the charcoaled chicken into the trash. “There goes lunch tomorrow too.”

“You’re really going for this healthy food after being on a bland diet so long?”

“Nico told me I needed clean food to gain back muscle mass.”

“It hasn’t even been a month, Matteo. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

His head whipped to mine and I could have kicked myself. It wasn’t the words, but the tone. And I couldn’t help it. I really cared for the bastard. I’d admit to even still loving him.

I allowed myself to peek into the jumbled emotions leaving scars holding my heart together. It still hurt like hell.

My eyes teared up before I could stop myself.

His face looked stricken.

“Baby...”

“Don’t.” I held up a hand.

“I’m really sorry for not being honest with you.”

I grabbed a paper towel from the holder. “It’s just that...I don’t know if I can trust myself or my emotions for you.”

“Are you crying because you love me?” he asked.

At first I was outraged that he expected me to love him after what he had done, but then the look in his eyes knocked me over...figuratively.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I whispered.

He came closer, dragged the other barstool close to me, and sat face to face. “Like I love you?”

“Matteo.”

“Because I do, baby. I’m madly, helplessly, and totally in love with you.”

“Why do you do this?” I shrieked at him. I tried to slide off the stool but he somehow caged me in with his legs and with his arms gripping the backrest of my chair.

“Let me go.”

“No.”

“Matteo.”

“You love me too,” he insisted. He grabbed my hands and put them over his chest. “What I feel for you is real.” Then he transferred our hands to my chest.

His eyes closed. “Your heart beats for me.”

“That’s very romantic.” I yanked my hands from his, my practiced mantra of resisting Matteo repeating in my head. “But I’m not that gullible.”

His eyes opened, the determination in them unmistakable. “I know you’re not.”

“If what we indeed feel is love, it’s not going to last because we built it on a messy foundation.”

“Agreed.” He stated calmly, staring at me for a long time, which made me nervous and confused. He rose to his full height and strode to the corner counter where he extracted a folder.

Anxiety curdled my insides. Matteo wasn’t smiling anymore. The playfulness of earlier was gone. This was his business face.

I took a nervous sip of wine for internal fortitude. “What’s that?”

He laid the folder on the countertop and he flicked it open.

My stomach dropped when I made out the words. “Divorce papers? You’re giving up?”

“Me?” he growled. “You’re the one who’s freezing me out and insisting on sleeping in another room. Not to mention you

rigged the locks so I couldn't enter."

"All I asked for was space to think about this. It hasn't been two weeks and you jump straight into divorce?" I was so angry I could spit. No. I was hurt as hell and my chest felt like it was caving in. "Where's the pen? Should I sign it?"

"You're not going to read it?"

"What's the use when apparently you're a man who gives up easily. I don't want you!"

"Read the fucking words, Sera," he growled.

I blinked back the tears and focused on the document. I blinked again, not quite comprehending the strange condition on the document. "Why the hell can't I date another man for six months?"

"Try never," he snapped.

I flipped the folder closed and glared at him. "Then what is this? Just another form to control me?"

He scrubbed a hand over his face in a gesture of frustration. Well, boohoo, I was more than frustrated. I was hurt, I was humiliated, I was furious enough to shred the divorce papers and throw them at his face.

He leaned in. "Understand this, wife." His voice was sharp, like a razor's edge. "The divorce gives us a clean slate. I want a do-over."

I reared back. "Explain."

"I want a do-over to a time before we said our vows. That's the fucking issue, isn't it?" he said. "Any time before we said our vows is re-workable. We just didn't get a chance to know each other enough."

"I have nothing else to hide from you," I said. "You're the one who hid things from me. I was an open book."

"You were."

"Are you saying you're willing to share what you were unwilling to tell me before?"

“I am.”

I studied his face. “Renz said he talked to you.”

“He did.” His face relaxed a bit. “It was high time we talked about that shit. But Dad made a good point.”

I cocked my head, not sure where he was going with this.

He brushed my cheek with the back of his hand and I wanted to lean into it. The rest of my body was crying for his touch, even my battered heart, but the core of my survival that lived in my brain cautioned me to tread carefully. I listened blindly to my heart before, disregarding all the warning signs. High on that emotion was affection that turned to love with a whole physical manifestation of lust.

“He said I wouldn’t fully understand Renz until I found someone I love as much as he did.”

Words. They were just words. But I’d be lying to myself if I denied I couldn’t see it in his eyes. Matteo was an open book. I’d seen enough of his shifting emotions to tell that his eyes were etched in desperation, hope, and love.

“And have you?”

He smiled in a way that melted the icy fortress surrounding my heart, but the hurt was still too deep to fold and give over easily no matter how much I craved his comfort.

“Baby,” he said. “If you doubted our feelings before our vows, you won’t be when I’m done. I’m going to ask you to marry me again.”

I wasn’t sure if I was irritated or awed at his arrogance. I went for a combination. “That’s very egotistical of you.”

Of course he had to use that chuckle that made me weak in the knees.

“I don’t want to drag out this uncertainty between us, Sera. I don’t want you to endlessly mull over what I did for weeks.”

“It doesn’t automatically erase it.”

“I know it doesn’t, but this divorce just shows you how desperate I am when all I want to do is take you back in my

arms, in my bed...and it's not about the sex..."

I raised a brow.

"Of course that too. I miss the taste of your pussy on my tongue and its grip on my cock. Jesus..." he groaned. "Don't make me hard when all I want to do is bury my face between your thighs."

"I'm not doing anything. You're doing it to yourself."

His smiled briefly, a hint of self-derision in it. "True." Then he surprised me by getting down on his knees.

"What are you doing? Are you begging me to divorce you?"

"Say yes." He glanced up at me, intensity in his eyes. "Say yes so I can ask you to marry me again. Say yes so I can show you how much you mean to me without a shadow of doubt. If I thought this would have ended up in you questioning what we shared back in Maine, I would have told you, baby." He gripped my knees together. "Let me prove that what we have is worth fighting for."

"I need to tell Luca."

His hands tightened around my knees. "I'd prefer it if we keep this between us."

"It's more complicated than that, Matteo. If you divorce me, I'm his responsibility again."

He was already shaking his head. "That's not true. If you read the divorce legalese, you will remain under De Lucci protection."

"How is that your decision?"

He rose and towered over me. This time bracing his hands on either side of me and locking me to the chair. "Any wife of mine, ex or otherwise, will be my responsibility."

That was a stab to the heart. My nonno had three wives. Could I stand to see Matteo with another?

"Since my wife and my ex are the same woman." This time a smile curved his mouth as though he liked what he saw

on my face. Damn him. I couldn't even hide my jealousy of a nonexistent woman, could I?

“I want to give you the wedding you deserve,” he said. “And the honeymoon where I can have you all to myself. No family. No mobsters. Just us. Maybe I should start looking for an island getaway.”

Hold strong, Sera. He was doing a full-court press. A divorce made sense, but still.

“I need to go over this.” I pushed the folder aside. “You’re trying to fast-track my forgiveness for your deception.” My chin tilted up. “I don’t think you’ve been penalized enough yet.”

“Ten days without you in my bed, knowing you’re just across the hall from me, is not suffering enough?”

“I’m still here. I haven’t abandoned our vows. I just want to wallow in the mess we’ve found ourselves in so I’m not likely to make the same mistake.”

“I’ve learned my lesson.”

“See, you haven’t,” I retorted. “This is not about you. This is about me deciding when I’m ready to forgive you.”

He winced when he realized he walked into a wall he’d set up himself. Matteo needed to learn humility. To empathize with others and not try to bully it over everyone.

The doorbell rang.

The pizza was here.

A pivotal moment was on the horizon, but I wasn’t ready to walk into it yet.



Matteo

“Tell me why I’m here with you again?” Nico didn’t question me this morning when I told him we needed to drop food from Jabbin’ Java at St. Catherine’s. He thought we were heading into the office afterward for the board meeting. He helped me carry the loaves from the back of the SUV into the church’s kitchen in preparation for the wave of homeless.

“Because simply writing a check is the coward’s way out,” I told him. “This is important to Sera and Renz. Giving our time would show how much we support them with what they are doing.”

“Got it,” he replied. The expression on his face told me he wanted to say something more, maybe along the lines of I was the one who fucked up with Sera, but there was no point in rehashing that because I had taken full responsibility.

Our youngest brother had worked out details with the chef and nutritionist of the St. Catherine’s soup kitchen so they could bump up the service from just once a week to twice. I asked Renz if he could manage an extra day. I would have told him to make it five, but he was at capacity at the bakery. He did tell me he had contacts in the industry who we could work with. It had taken the breakdown of my relationship with Sera to see my youngest brother for the admirable entrepreneur he was. For so long, I only saw numbers and spreadsheets, not the people behind the company and land we were developing or selling. I thought I had compassion, but this was on a different level. We were born with the proverbial silver spoon, yet Renz turned up his nose at it and accomplished something for himself.

Sister Agnes recognized me when Nico and I entered the building. She smiled and gestured for us to follow her. “Your brother and wife were here the other day. I cannot thank you both enough for the generous donation and the time.”

“It’s our pleasure, ma’am.” My heart clenched at the word wife. It had been five days since I asked Sera for a divorce, but she hadn’t said anything yet nor had she signed the papers. Each day she stewed over the documents, was one more day I got antsy. I guess I deserved this torture. But I wasn’t waiting to prove to her that I was in this for the long haul. That she

meant everything to me. I had my own shit to figure out so I could be worthy of her.

We met the kitchen staff and the chef who put Nico and me immediately to work. We had passable knife skills and prep work was tedious, but they needed all the help to feed an expected two hundred people. It was double the amount Sera and I had served together in this very same venue.

After our kitchen duties, Nico and I were sent to assist with packaging the food. I was scooping mixed vegetables into a Styrofoam container when I felt her. I glanced up.

Sera stood at the entrance and she was staring at me.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Nico.

My brother mumbled something, but I ignored him. All my focus was on my wife who had turned around and walked out of the building.

I hurried after her, thinking she would leave, but she just stood right outside the steps of St. Catherine’s.

I spotted Trevor and two other Arrows who were her bodyguards. Sera must’ve hated the added security, but Dom told me Santino had been going after supporters of Vincenzo and they couldn’t reach Gustavo. Luca had already called me and offered his soldiers.

“How did you know I was here?” I asked.

“Jonas. I went to your office.”

“Oh, was there something you needed?”

“What are you doing here, Matteo?”

I looked at Trevor. He tossed me the key to the Patrol I spotted parked on the street. I grabbed her elbow and guided her to the vehicle, not answering her until we got inside it.

She wasn’t pleased. I would even say she was irritated at me.

“What are you doing here?” she repeated her question while crossing her arms and leaning against her side.

I wasn't sure what was pissing her off. "I thought it was obvious. I'm helping out."

"They don't have Thursdays. I was surprised when Jonas told me you were here." Her face turned from pissed off to conflicted. "I don't know what to think."

"I'm not doing this to score points with you," I told her. "This has nothing to do with what you feel about me. I'm not doing this so you will forgive me."

"Then I don't understand."

"I'm doing this because it's important to you. It's important to Renz. It's important to the people I love," I said. "I wanted to support you but not in a way to manipulate you." I looked back at the church. "Not like this at least. This is more for me. For understanding you and my youngest brother."

"Oh, Matteo." This time all suspicions fled from her face and I had the strongest desire to kiss her. I didn't want to see conflict on her face. I wanted to see acceptance, to finally see me as someone who would love every part of her. Coming here to the charity and doing this was really for me. I didn't want her to dissect my intention.

This reminded me of something I did want to do for her. "Now, that's not saying I don't want to score positive points in some other way." At her dubious expression, I smirked while I reached into my pocket. I extracted her St. Rita bracelet I had kept.

She gasped. "I lost that. I didn't know when." I didn't know how much I was in a deep freeze of misery until I saw the glow of happiness on her face. Still, I needed to tread carefully. I intended to win the long game.

"I found it in our closet the day you moved out of the room." She offered me her wrist and I obliged by clasp the bracelet around it. "They had to change the chain, but the coin is the same."

"That's fine," she whispered, her gaze on her wrist as she twisted the bracelet around. She smiled at me. "Thank you."

The initial happiness on her face slowly morphed into sadness and regret.

My chest tightened when I saw tears forming in her eyes. “Was there a reason you came to the office?”

Exhaling heavily, she reached behind our seats and brought into view a folder.

The folder that held our divorce papers.

I swallowed. “You signed it.”

“That’s what you wanted, right?” she said, gravel scratching her voice. Then her face crumpled. “This is so fucked up.”

Her fingers were white against the folder.

Emotion pressed up my throat. It was easier at that time I told her, but getting a glimpse of the old Sera was a royal mind fuck that maybe I was too rash in suggesting divorce and should have waited her out.

You fucked up, De Lucci, you’re going to see this through.

“Baby...” I rasped and reached for the folder.

Her eyes met mine, the well of tears finally falling down her cheeks. “Are we doing the right thing?”

“Are you past what I did?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Then we’re doing the right thing.”

“Damn you for suggesting it.”

I chuckled in self-deprecation. “I’m already damned in hell, baby, burning every night you’re not beside me.”

She let go of the folder and swiped the tears from her cheeks. “You say the sweetest things at the wrong time.”

I tipped her chin up. “We’ll get there.” I hated seeing the doubt in her eyes and this firmed up my resolve that I was doing the right thing. She would believe and trust in me and there would be no resistance when I asked her to marry me again.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Three

SERA

I couldn't sleep, tossing and turning in bed where I'd had countless dreams of a certain dark-haired handsome man, hugging him, staring at sunsets, and eating cotton candy. I thought about this for a few days and was determined that this was the best course of action.

I shifted to get more comfortable and stared at my bracelet, fiddling with the new chain.

Seeing Matteo at the charity, I was angry at first. I thought he was doing it just to be bossy. To take over and not trust me to handle what I did with his money. Then I was ashamed when I realized exactly what he was doing. It wasn't for me directly, but for his relationship with Renz as well. That was something I, as his wife, should have seen immediately. There was so much more I needed to unpack about my husband. But wasn't that what marriages of convenience were all about?

We could learn about each other in time while we're married, but I recognized my husband's impatience. Then he went and threw me a curveball when he gave me back the one most precious object in my life. I sat up in bed, and switched on the lights, and stared at the coin. Made of bronze, it was scratched, and it had been polished to a newish shine again. But the value was not in its monetary worth, but in how it encompassed the meaning of my life.

Matteo gave it back to me and then I handed him divorce papers.

My marriage didn't even last five weeks. I couldn't bear to tell Luca. Matteo was filing immediately.

A thump sounded by my door. My heart pounded. I hadn't put the chair underneath it for a few days, and I wondered if Matteo thought our divorce gave him a clean slate to start a sexual relationship with me.

Well, if that was what he thought, he was sadly mistaken. I waited a few more seconds, maybe it was a minute or two, but I did not hear that sound again.

But I was thirsty and I had forgotten to get my glass of water. To avoid running into my husband in the hallway, I'd been stocking up things in my room the past few days. I felt like a hoarder or a prepper. I thought of getting a small fridge, but I didn't want to feel imprisoned. Would it still make sense to live here if I were divorced from him? We hadn't discussed the details since he had to run back to the charity. I was painfully aware that we'd been living separate lives these past three weeks. I missed him so much, my conflicted emotions were killing me.

I loved him.

I hated him.

I wished I had never married him.

Then I'd dream of our happier times, and I'd convinced myself that the feeling was too beautiful not to fight for. And I was afraid I would never experience that level of love with another man. Yet, I was more afraid I could not bring myself to trust him again.

Clean slate.

The nightstand clock told me it was two thirty a.m. Hot milk always helped my sleepless nights, but I'd been having too much of the bacon and egg brioche. Sometimes I would have it two times a day and now several of my jeans' top buttons wouldn't close. Apparently when my heart was broken, I was one who turned to food.

Deciding I didn't want to be a zombie in the morning, I threw back my blanket, crossed the room, and opened the door.

A body fell into the room.

A male voice cursed.

I shrieked.

"Matteo? What the hell are you doing outside my door?"

He pushed up from the floor but crawled to the wall inside my room and sat against it. "The divorce is fucking me up."

"You're the one who wanted it," I whispered, kneeling in front of him. I caught a whiff of scotch and saw the tipped tumbler on the floor. "Have you been drinking?"

"No," he growled.

"I can smell it on you, don't lie."

"Drinking means I'm drunk. I just had two fingers... maybe four." He held out his hand. "Come here, baby, don't be mad."

"I'm not mad. I just don't want you to regress."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"Woman, come sit beside me."

"Shouldn't we move to somewhere more comfortable?"

"No, I like it here." He breathed out a chuckle. "Makes me look more pathetic. I am a pathetic bastard, aren't I, baby?"

"No sex."

He grumbled. "I'd die for just a kiss. Just saying."

He was trying to be cute.

So, I sat beside him. He linked our fingers and kissed my knuckles before holding it against his chest. Rapid beats pulsed against the back of my hand.

"Thank you," he said.

I wasn't sure what he meant, but I was certain it wasn't about sitting beside him. I didn't say anything.

"Because of you I came to understand Renz more," he continued. "Scratch that. I completely see where he was coming from and I'm ashamed of what I had told him at that time."

I stilled. He was opening up about his relationship with his brother.

"We had a long chat while I helped him winterize his rooftop garden." He chuckled. "I'd been wearing a suit."

"Aw..." I said. "Bet you looked hot with rolled-up sleeves and grimed up."

He cast me a side-long glance. "Noted."

"Go on." I squeezed our joined fingers.

"I apologized to Liz today," he said quietly. "Five years after I'd been a dick to her, I finally said the words."

I paused. "She never seemed to resent you."

"Because she's the sweetest, most forgiving soul," he said. "I was a selfish, arrogant prick and I accused her of being a gold digger."

"Oh, Matteo."

"I was a twenty-three-year-old asshole. She was barely eighteen. You wanted to know if I was a bossy know-it-all, I was."

"You were concerned for Renz," I said. "But that's a really harsh thing to say about the woman he loves."

"I wanted him to go to college," I said. "I should have respected what he wanted."

"But they're together now."

"It hasn't been easy. That wasn't the worst of it." His hand gripped mine tighter as if what he was going to say next was going to make me pull away. "What is it?"

After an eternity, he said, “Renz was hurt and pissed. Even when Dad and Mom told him the family supported him, I was still an ass. Even when my parents told me to stay out of it, I made my disapproval known.”

I kept my mouth shut, but my heart was palpitating, knowing I was on the verge of finding out his demons.

“I was an ass,” he repeated, more to himself than to me. My heart was breaking for the damage to their relationship.

“I’d been such a dick, Renz moved in with Liz. It was in a part of town where the De Luccis didn’t have much sway.”

“Oh no.”

“My brother was being reckless and emotional and he knew it. He and Liz were going to find somewhere else to stay. He refused help from the family. And as you can tell, living in Manhattan isn’t cheap.”

He inhaled raggedly, clearly tormented. “It was in the middle of a war between the Caruso and De Lucci crime families.”

“Oh, Matteo.”

He cast me a brief glance, but he couldn’t meet my eyes. This was shame he still felt unto this day. “The Caruso crew got to Liz. She was pregnant with twins. Some asshole beat her and broke her leg.”

A distressed sound echoed in the room. It came from me.

“Go on,” I croaked, wanting Matteo to get it all out.

“We found the house where they were keeping her. It wasn’t pretty, but we got her back.”

“Did they...”

“No. They didn’t rape her.”

“Thank God.”

“But she lost one of the twins. We thought she lost both. Still, it was a long road before Renz was able to talk to me

again...I wasn't sure I'd forgiven myself until we had it out a few days ago."

"You didn't tell him to leave," I said gently.

"I didn't make it easy for him to stay either," he said. "When Samantha was born, we decided to call a truce. Renz and I agreed we were a couple of idiots and let our hotheads get the best of us."

"But your chat the other day is more than a truce, right?"

"I finally said the words."

"What words?"

"I apologized."

My mouth fell open. "Matteo!"

"It wasn't as if I didn't want to. There was no real opportunity. We were just in each other's lives and were never close again after that. We meet at family gatherings, but Renz is all about the coffee shop and his family. Nico and I were all about the business and carrying on with the De Lucci legacy." He snorted softly in amusement. "I wondered if my parents' extended vacation was to let us boys bond or something."

"What?"

"My sister, Bianca? She's tight with Renz. I was jealous of that too."

I rolled my eyes.

"She's my baby sister."

"Let me guess, you thought Renz would be a bad influence on her."

His nonanswer told me everything.

"It seems we need to work on your desire to boss everyone around."

"I'm working on it," he muttered.

"Liz is too nice," I quipped.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be on my side,” he chided. “But she forgave me a long time ago.”

“She’s definitely the angel of the family,” I said.

“You’re mine, Seraphina,” he murmured. “You like saving people. Maybe it’s time to save me.”

“Maybe,” I whispered back.

We looked at each other. His face inched closer. He searched my eyes as if gauging my reaction.

I wasn’t ready to go to bed with him or to engage in something I wasn’t ready to give. We were at a better place, learning more about each other’s demons.

This was huge, but even if I was hesitant to jump in, I couldn’t help moving closer. I cupped his jaw and pressed my lips against his.

A deep groan rumbled in his chest, as if he finally got what he wanted after an eternity of waiting.

But before he could prolong the kiss, I pulled away and said, “Thank you for telling me. You don’t know how much this means to me that you trusted me with your past.”

He smiled wryly. “You deserved to know. It was time.”

“And it’s time for us to sleep,” I announced, standing up and dragging him up with me.

He grabbed the tumbler from the floor. “Where were you going?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” I admitted. “I was going for the old remedy of warm milk.”

He kissed the top of my forehead. “I’ll get it for you.”

“Matteo...”

“Baby, we may be heading for divorce, but in my mind, you’re still my wife. Mine to cherish and that means making sure you get your warm milk no matter what damn time of the night it is.”

Bossy Matteo was back, but I was finding I was thrilled with this type of bossiness.

I smiled. “Okay.”

“Consider this part of my courtship.” He grinned before he turned around and left the room.

Ten minutes later he returned and handed me my warm milk.

Without another word, he turned around and closed the door.

I slept peacefully after.



Another week went by following the night he unburdened his past. Something shifted in our relationship. I wondered if my distrust had been there all along because he hadn't shared the demons that haunted him, and his and Daniel's bullshit plan only revealed the fragility of our bond.

We'd started to hang out after dinner. I no longer hid in my room to avoid him. On the nights Ava and Cesar stayed home, I joined them in the family room to chat or watch movies. On the nights his parents were out, and Matteo and I spent time together, we discussed anything and everything.

We only exchanged chaste kisses. I think we were both afraid of jumping in too soon and ruining our progress. But each night that passed, it was getting harder and harder to keep our hands off each other.

Last night, he asked me into his study to help him figure out what to do with Mancini Winery. His IT department created an account for me so I could access their servers. Together we pored over financials and business processes. It was an overview of the state of the winery. It was in a bad way. I'd heard about the reputation of the developer that Matteo was going to sell the winery to and despite the top dollars that company was going to pay, it would give them a

right to tear the winery apart, destroy the beautiful structure, and commercialize the land, destroying its beauty.

After spending two hours poring over data, we called it a night.

“Well, this is me,” I said as though we were in a hotel going back to our rooms. “I’ll look it over some more tomorrow.”

“Not tomorrow,” he said, edging closer until my back was against my door. He towered over me. “We have to discuss something with Renz.”

The words out of his mouth didn’t match the heat in his eyes. Warmth bloomed in my cheeks. Matteo could still make me blush with a look. More so with this simmering tension between us. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

His mouth curved. “Because I want to kiss you and it’s not a good idea.”

“Why?”

He dropped his forehead to mine. “Baby, it’s killing me how I can’t kiss you the way I want to.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“I don’t want to fuck things up again,” he growled. “I wrongly assumed we had all the time in the world to get to know each other, and when one lie came to light, your trust in me crumbled.” He breathed heavily. “If I took the time to understand your hopes and dreams, made you more secure in my love for you, I think you would have forgiven me sooner.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I love you,” he said with a conviction that burned into my heart. “I fucking love you, Sera.”

His mouth was millimeters from mine.

“Matteo...” I said his name with an ache in my soul.

His mouth touched mine and an inferno exploded between us. For the first time in weeks, we kissed. Really kissed. I opened to him, and his tongue slipped between and tangled

fiercely with my own. His body crushed my breasts, our hunger for each other sparking scorching flames that consumed us. But he kept his hands on either side of the door, and somehow the tension within him cascaded into me and the desperation with which he ground me against the wooden barrier signaled he was at the end of his control.

He lowered one arm, and I heard a click.

He delved one more time for a deep kiss before he pulled away. “Soon, baby,” he whispered. Then he opened the door.

“Now, get inside before I do filthy things to you right in the hallway.”

I didn’t know if I was relieved or disappointed. As usual, Matteo inspired so many reactions in me. All I knew was when I was on the opposite side of the door and leaning against it, my whole body was on fire and alive.

And as I walked into the bathroom, I started to hum. I stared at my ravaged mouth, swollen with his kisses, and smiled.

I was giddy.

And I was pretty sure I was still in love with my ex-husband.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Four

SERA

Something was up with Matteo. He had a secretive smile on his face all morning and I didn't trust the gleam in his eyes. Our kiss the night before wreaked havoc on my dreams. They'd been the most erotic ever. In my dreams, he had me up on the kitchen counter at the mansion and he was eating me like dessert.

It had been a while since I woke up with throbbing between my legs. I guessed Matteo and I were moving in the right direction, but there was still a barrier that was preventing me from taking that leap of faith.

But with each passing day, I saw how divorce was the best option. It removed the shackles from his lie and omission and reset the relationship that had spiraled out of control, so we could retrace our steps more slowly.

I paced the sitting room, waiting for Matteo. He had to take a call right before we left. Paintings from the masters were scattered around the house, including this Picasso in front of me. Luca and Nonno explained to me very early in life that art was recession proof and many billionaires including mobsters chose to invest in it.

“Ready?” Matteo asked behind me.

I turned, and my eyes hungrily devoured the figure he cut in his fine fitted suit. We were heading into the office after

lunch at the café, so I dressed in a cream blazer with matching wool pencil skirt that hit at the knee. Heels that made me look five-five finished my look. Renz had a new special on the menu he wanted us to try. Instead of feeling offended that Matteo seemed to be taking over in the interest of his brother's business, I was thrilled that the two were bonding more. No matter what happened to my relationship with Matteo, I was happy I was the catalyst that sparked his reconciliation with his brother.

“Baby, you look incredibly sexy,” Matteo murmured, going straight for my lips. Hmm, he was getting more forward.

“Well, sexy wasn't what I was going for,” I retorted. “I was trying to look presentable for our meeting with Mrs. Mancini.”

Something flickered in his eyes.

“We're meeting her today, right?”

He grinned, but it was one of his fake grins that didn't settle well with me. I tried not to feel dejected that I was going to be disappointed in him again. I promised myself I was giving Matteo a second chance without the prejudice of the past. But if he tricked me again, that was it.

“Let's go meet Renz.” He ushered me out of the sitting room into the large foyer to exit the grand threshold of the mansion. At the bottom of the marble staircase sat Matteo's Jaguar in all its gleaming glory.

“Is this why you kept me waiting?” I teased. “You waxed your car again?”

“Stop calling it a car, baby,” he muttered. “It's a performance vehicle.”

I rolled my eyes. “You should talk cars with my uncle.”

“I heard he's got quite a fleet.” He helped me into the seat before he gently closed the door to round the hood. He stopped a bit to take a look at the tire, then he reached the driver's side and slid into the seat.

“Buckle up,” he said. “It's going to be a beautiful day.”

“It's November and icy cold.”

“Blue skies.”

“Why are you in such a cheery mood?” I was somewhat peeved that he might be thinking I was a foregone conclusion. Was there such a thing as fond annoyance?

Yes. Yes, there is and his name is Matteo De Lucci.

He put on his reflective shades, glanced over, and grinned at me in that panty-melting way before revving the engine and screeching out of the driveway.

He was pulling out all the stops with his sexiness and I couldn't help but swoon. Admittedly it was physical, remembering the dream I had of him last night, but was that so bad?

Suddenly, I was impatient to experience a Matteo De Lucci pounding. It had been weeks.

I stared at his fingers before I forced myself to look out the window. Those fingers that knew how to work me, had been deep inside me, and made me come over and over.

My phone buzzed. I was thankful to have something else to distract me from Matteo's very fine points.

“Hey,” I told Ivy. “We're on our way.”

“Yes, just calling to see how many minutes before uh, Renz prepares the stuff.”

“What is it?”

“It's a surprise,” Ivy said.

“Were you in on it?” I glared at Matteo, who cast me an amused glance.

“Of course not. So twenty minutes?”

“You're deflecting.”

“Okay, twenty minutes. Bye.”

I told my ex-husband, “You guys are up to something.”

If I didn't know him better, I'd say he was wearing a stoic mask, but that telltale twitch at the corner of his mouth was a dead giveaway.

I decided to be patient.

We'd made this trip countless times, but the urge to link my fingers with his as he maneuvered the powerful sports car was in stark contrast with how I cringed at any physical contact with him directly after I discovered his betrayal with Daniel.

Speaking of Daniel, Ivy's brother was in town. I hadn't seen a peep out of him since everything came to light. My crush on him crashed and burned so quickly. He and Matteo used me without my knowledge. As I'd had time to digest what went down with the fake dating in relation to Gustavo and the shares and the Archer Syndicate's goal to stop the Galluzo from being too powerful, I could admit what they had done was for the greater good. I wasn't too egotistical to wallow in my hurt feelings. I'd shared so much with Matteo, it was hard to simply throw us away. Plus, I felt like I could take an active role as his Lady Archer. For the first time since my induction ceremony, I preened at the title.

"You seem pleased about something," Matteo said.

"What are you talking about?"

"That smile on your face."

"I was thinking of Daniel and—"

"Excuse me?"

"Stop overreacting."

That was also the wrong thing to say. A chill descended on the car and displaced the cozy warmth out from it.

"It's not overreacting when my wife has this secretive smile and admits she's thinking of another man," he said tautly. "And just not any man but one she would have fancied being married to."

"If you would just let me finish."

He cursed in Italian.

That was damn sexy and I wanted to make him suffer a bit longer if I didn't think I was being needlessly petty. "I was

about to say...I was thinking of Daniel and *you*. Of your scheme to use me without my knowledge. Seeing what havoc Santino wreaked in Italy, I'm not too prideful to hold a grudge. And though it destroyed my crush on Daniel, with you..."

I let it hang. Obviously, I still had some pettiness in me.

His fingers gripped the steering wheel. "What about me?"

"You and me? What we have is worth fighting for."

And just like that, the stranglehold of frigidness in the car dissipated. The rest of the trip to Manhattan was fraught with less tension, but there was still the unknown of what everyone was up to.

I certainly hoped it was not a surprise wedding. I wouldn't put it past Matteo, but he wouldn't do it with the way our relationship was at the moment. We were so close to being back to us.

When we turned onto the street where Jabbin' Java was located, a bus with a gigantic lobster painted on its back was parked in front of the building. I looked closer. Wait, it wasn't a bus, it was a food truck.

My mouth fell open when I realized what was happening.

"Bar Harbor Lobster food truck?" I shrieked at Matteo. "You brought in an entire food truck from Maine?"

He didn't say anything, except he looked pleased and cocky as hell.

"Oh my God, Matteo." My heart pushed against my throat. It wasn't even about the money he spent on having this done. But that he even thought of it.

"If we can't go to Maine, I'll bring Maine to you."

He turned the Jaguar into the alleyway while I texted Ivy.

The second he parked, I unbuckled my seat belt and flew into him, peppering his face with kisses. I was teary eyed. "Thank you, thank you."

"Damn, baby," he muttered, his eyes full of heat. "If I'd known this would be your reaction..."

“Everything that led up to this, Matteo.” My voice was garbled with emotion. “Everything.”

Then we kissed.

We didn’t care when the back door swung open and people spilled out. We didn’t care when we heard Ivy shriek in excitement the same way I did. We just didn’t care.

Our world revolved around each other.

“Looks like they made up,” someone said from outside.

“Hey!” Renz pounded on the windshield. “Save that for later. The natives are hungry.”

I pulled away, but Matteo went in for one more deep dive before letting me go.

“Later,” I breathed.

The slow smile on his face made me blush.

“I meant, later, we’ll talk,” I corrected.

“I know, baby,” he murmured.

When we came out of the vehicle, it made me rethink my impulsive gesture because we were surrounded by everyone we knew.

Ivy hugged me. “Oh my God! You have permission to forgive him now.”

“Over lobster?” I laughed. I was giddy. I was realizing how Matteo never did things by half measure. We had a popular lobster franchise in Manhattan, but he had to recreate everything we did before our vows as much as possible.

“Don’t you get it?” she was still excited. “He’s your lobster.”

“Are you referring to that episode of *Friends* where—”

“Who cares?” Ivy told me.

“Can I have my wife back?” Matteo said in a teasing voice. He linked our fingers together and bypassed the building, heading straight for the lobster truck.

I had trouble keeping my tears at bay when I saw the cotton candy kiosk spinning a pink magical nest for a line of young kids.

“Who are they?”

“Kids of the family,” Matteo told me. “This is open to everyone, but the first lobster roll belongs to you.”

Oh my God, this man. He truly is my lobster.

A man in the Bar Harbor shirt looked at Matteo. “Open for business?”

“Do it,” he said.

What followed was a joyous blur. Everyone was having a good time. There were enough lobster rolls to feed an army. Everyone I knew showed up. Matteo’s parents, the McGraths. There were several Arrows I recognized including Trevor. Dom and his crew. Others who looked familiar were soldiers of allied crime families.

I was chatting with Ivy when she looked past me and groaned, “What is he doing here?”

I glanced over my shoulder.

Daniel.

He spoke to an Arrow standing guard before walking up the sidewalk. Matteo spotted him and pushed through the crowd. When he reached Daniel, I held my breath.

He shoved his friend on both shoulders.

“Dammit.” But something else caught my eye further past the crowd at the end of the block. A man in a leather jacket was rounding an Escalade and opening the second passenger door. It blended with the rest of the black SUVs that brought in the De Lucci mob family and their associates.

Tony?

Why is my uncle’s soldier in Manhattan? He casually nodded at one of Dom’s soldiers who waved in return.

I whipped out my phone and called Luca as I walked toward Tony, a feeling of unease rising inside me. He answered on the first ring.

“Sera?”

“Why is Tony here?”

“You see the Escalade in front of him?” he said. “Go there.”

“What’s going on, Luca?”

“If you don’t want to become a widow,” he said. “You will tell me in your own words and to my face what your husband has done.”

“How did you—” I glanced over my shoulder at Ivy’s brother who was in a heated exchange with Matteo. “Did Daniel tell you?”

“Does it matter how I found out? I’m very disappointed in you, Sera.”

“My marriage, my problems.”

When I was five feet from the Escalade, Ivy yelled, “Sera!” She was craning her neck amongst the sea of the Hell’s Kitchen lunch crowd.

Matteo whipped around from his argument with Daniel.

“Get in or I will end him.”

“Wait a damn minute.” I got to the open door, lowered the phone and glared at my uncle. I hadn’t seen him since the hospital and we had spoken very little in the last two weeks. He’d been occupied with Santino as the shakeup of the Galluzo mafia affected Chicago more than it did the New York Five Families.

Scuffles and shouting erupted behind me.

“I’m fine. Don’t I look fine?”

“Sera!” Matteo shouted.

A force shoved me into the Escalade. The slam of the door and engaging locks sounded ominous.

“What the fuck, Luca?” I shouted as the SUV skidded out of the parking space.

“Damn traffic,” my uncle growled at the driver. “Just plow through it.”

“Sure thing,” a man I didn’t recognize said.

I straightened in my seat, grabbed the handle, and tried the door just in time to see Matteo punch Tony who intercepted him.

He threw himself against the SUV.

“Moretti, you son of a bitch!” He slapped his palm on the window, trying the door with futility.

“Go! Go!” Luca shouted.

I lunged in between the console to hit the locks, but my uncle held me back and hissed in my ear. “You want your husband to live?”

I’d never heard that tone of voice directed at me, but I’d heard him use it countless times against associates I never saw alive again or had gone missing. It gave me pause and a chill.

“It’s time for you to make sacrifices for the family, dear niece.”

Matteo kept pace with the vehicle and punched the window in a rage. I flinched. Tears blurred my vision, and I started sobbing. I couldn’t bear to see him hurt. I’d never seen his face this feral with fury.

The vehicle shot forward when there was a clearing in the traffic. It was total mayhem around us. I couldn’t tell which ones were Arrows, De Lucci soldiers, and Luca’s men.

I turned in my seat to see Matteo’s stricken face. He yelled my name in an anguished roar, and all I could do was watch helplessly.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Five

MATTEO

I was so blinded with rage, I couldn't see straight. We couldn't haul Tony and the Chicago soldiers to the basement because they weren't a part of the organization, so we cleared The Grindhouse boxing gym and interrogated them there.

My right fist was submerged in a bowl of ice. Numbed to its pain because nothing compared to the anguish and anger tearing my chest wide open.

Sera was gone.

And no one would tell me where Luca had taken her.

Trevor returned and informed us the Escalade was found parked in an alley. They'd switched vehicles.

"Tell me what the fuck is going on?" I snarled at Tony.

"It's not time for you to know, kid."

"Kid," I sneered. "This kid could end you right now." I picked up the gun beside the bowl of ice with my left hand. My eyes scanned the room to find Daniel and Dom. "What I want to know was how Luca got past the security of Hell's Kitchen."

"Luca asked me for permission to see Sera," Dom said. "It was a boss-to-boss request."

"Enough of this boss-to-boss bullshit," I snapped.

Dom's eyes narrowed. "I'm still the head of this family, *cuz.*"

My jaw clenched. My cousin knew I couldn't say I was the head of the Archers in front of Tony and his crew. Dad shot me a warning look.

Mom, who was trying not to hover over me, put a hand on my elbow and told Dom, "I agree it's goodwill but we know Luca is unpredictable. How about courtesy extended to your own family?"

"Aunt Ava, with all due respect," Dom said. "Where was the courtesy when Matteo didn't tell us that he and Sera filed for a divorce?"

Gasps and murmurs echoed around the room.

Tony glared at Dom. "You didn't mention that to Luca."

"And I didn't mention it for a reason," my cousin shot back.

I didn't even ask him how he knew. I had the family lawyer expedite the divorce on the condition of secrecy. The only person he couldn't keep it from was the boss.

Mom looked at Dad. "Did you know?"

"I was there when Renz suggested it to Matteo."

"Why in the world would Renz suggest that?" Mom spun back to face me.

"*Cara,*" Dad said in a censuring tone. She was starting to interfere in family business. She'd always been good with keeping things separate, but with me being her eldest, with my marriage in turmoil, not to mention I'd fucked up my hand, holding back was asking too much. Though I sure as fuck hoped I hadn't broken any fingers, I was far from caring right now.

"We have their phones." Trevor stepped forward and put the devices on the table.

"Luca is going to call when he needs us," Tony said. "We need to trust the boss."



Sera

Santino Conte, my jilted almost-fiancé, stood across the table from me and Luca, hands flat on the table, leaning in. Frankie Rossi sat beside him, smoking a cigar. The other Rossi brother, Alessandro, stood behind Santino, looking bored. He was the driver of the second SUV when we switched our vehicles.

After Luca told me what was going on, I had no choice but to go along, but I couldn't get the image of Matteo's face out of my mind. It was a face of a man who was on the brink of losing everything. At that moment, I swore if I got out of this mess alive, I would do everything to fix my marriage. It was holding on to that thought that was keeping me centered in the presence of two psychos, my uncle being the other one.

"I did as you requested," Luca said. "My niece."

"I'm not sure I want anyone's leftovers and she's still married."

Santino was not familiar with my uncle's tells, but I was. Luca's fingers curled over the surface of the marble top and he started rapping it slowly. He was aching to reach for his weapon but he had none because Alessandro sussed him out before we entered the Rossi mansion.

Chicago was related to the Rossis through Nonno's third wife, but relationships had been strained since Frankie took over. So scratch that, there were three psychopaths in the room. A migraine started to form at the center of my forehead and radiated to my eyes, making them twitch.

"Actually, Matteo and I have filed for divorce," I said.

That took Santino and Frankie by surprise. Luca was surprised too when I told him back at the safe house where he had taken me to explain his scheme. He'd been in a rip-roaring rage. I had to extract a promise from him not to harm Matteo

in exchange to help him. My uncle quickly turned this information to his advantage, and after a few quick calls, secured the scanned divorce papers on his phone.

Luca unlocked his phone and slid it to Santino. “This can be expedited and the judge can sign it in less than a week. You want an alliance between Chicago and the Galluzo, it’s within your reach. But I love my niece. She’s the treasured daughter of my oldest brother. All I ask is you treat her well.”

“She insulted me by marrying that mongrel.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, following Luca’s lead. “I made a mistake. Matteo hides behind expensive suits, but underneath it all he’s a wolf who has no respect for the old ways.”

“Perhaps I can sweeten the deal?” Luca suggested. “I have control of Sera’s trust fund until she’s thirty, but in the event she gets married before then, I have the option to use it as part of a dowry in an arranged marriage. It’s ten million.”

Oh, Luca. It was five hundred thousand, and it was my education fund. My uncle was lying through the skin of his teeth. And he was good at it. If someone put a lie detector on him right now, he’d pass it.

“This wasn’t on the table before.”

“I want my niece’s marriage prospects to see her worth.” He sighed. “But now she’s tarnished by her marriage to De Lucci. A divorcée...you know how that goes.”

Ouch.

Santino returned my uncle’s phone and started pacing the length of the table. He was rubbing his finger and thumb across his jaw. Finally, he stopped and pinned me with his gaze. “Stand up and come here.”

“Now wait a minute,” Luca barked.

The other man raised a brow. “She’s tainted goods. I want to see just how tainted.”

“It’s okay...” I said. My knees were knocking together and on some weird level I heard Ivy telling me to scoop my

stomach that one time she duped me into going to Pilates with her. I held on to that memory, pulled my navel to my spine, and I managed to walk over to where Santino was leering at me.

I was praying Luca would hold on to his temper until we got what we wanted, otherwise we risked everything for nothing.

Santino hauled me into him. He lowered his head and nuzzled my neck and then he inhaled me. His hand lowered to my ass and squeezed.

I cried out in outrage, stepped back, and slapped him across the face. And then I gasped, realizing what I'd done.

Luca came out of his seat.

So did Frankie.

Santino whipped out his gun and pointed it at my uncle. "Sit. Down."

My uncle's jaw worked furiously. This was costing him. Well, too late for second thoughts now.

He dropped back into the chair.

"Let's not do anything rash here," Frankie warned before sitting down.

Instead of getting pissed off, Santino touched his cheek and laughed with glee. "Feisty." He lowered his gun. "I see why De Lucci wanted you, but why did he divorce you?"

"Correction. I was the one who asked for a divorce. He lied to me and used me to get Gustavo's shares." I was surprised how steady my voice was despite the way my heart wanted to beat out of my rib cage. "Touch me again and I walk out of here." I played a card I wasn't ready to play, but I'd rather shoot myself than have this gorilla paw me again. "Where is Zio Gus? What have you done with him?"

"That's the agreement, is it not?" It was Frankie who asked Santino. "Give them the location of Gustavo and let's get this over with. I don't want to get in deeper shit with the De Luccis even if it pleases me to stick it to them like this."

“Fine.” Santino dug out his phone and thumbed a number and said, “Let the old man go.”

A few minutes passed. Sweat trickled down my spine. Once Gustavo’s safety was ensured, the rest of the plan would go into play.

A message pinged on Luca’s phone. He stared at it and glanced at me, his face unreadable, then he looked at Santino. “We’re good.”

My uncle slid his chair back and stood, not taking his eyes off Santino. “I’m entrusting you with my niece. If I hear of any abuse, just know I will come for you.”

“Understood.” Santino smirked. “I’ll send you an invitation to our wedding.”

I was ready to throw up.

“Treat her with respect.”

Frankie snorted. “That’s rich coming from you, Luca. You just handed over your precious mafia princess in exchange for an old man to ensure the alliance with the Galluzo.”

“It was the original plan. De Lucci just fucked it up,” Luca said, fixing his suit and flicking a speck off his sleeve. “Well, gentlemen, I need to get going before the De Luccis find a way to ground my plane.”

“Oh, they’re hunting for you.” Frankie grinned in that maniacal way that made my skin crawl. “It’s all over my messages.”

“Fabulous,” Luca muttered.

“Your weapons will be handed to you at the door,” Alessandro said before turning to Santino. “Let’s get you and your men out of here.”

Frankie stubbed out his cigar. “Let me walk you out, Luca.”

My uncle nodded stiffly, glanced at me one more time, then strode out the door.

“Poor man is so guilty, he couldn’t even give you a hug.” Santino stared at the retreating backs of Frankie and Luca for long seconds before his gaze dropped to me. “See, if you’d just gone with me that first time, Gustavo wouldn’t have gotten a little banged up and we could have avoided all this drama.”

He put an arm around me and hauled me to his side in an unmistakable gesture of ownership. His cologne burned my nostrils and turned my already queasy stomach queasier.

Navel to the spine, I repeated in my head.

“I can’t believe you would hurt your uncle.”

“He’s a nobody. He’ll always remain a bastard’s son. All he had was money. No power. Once he sold those shares to the De Luccis, he became a marked man.”

We followed Alessandro and a crew of mafia soldiers out of the dining room into an elaborate Tuscan kitchen with high ceilings, fresco walls, and red tiles. We entered another room that appeared to be the kitchen’s pantry. An earthy smell joined Santino’s cloying scent before automatic lights revealed stacks of gallon-sized tomato cans, tins of olive oil, and other preserves that were a mainstay of an Italian kitchen. In the center of the room was an oak barrel with a wheel of parmesan on top of it.

Under any other circumstances, I would have been delighted to sample bread and cheese and olive oil if I weren’t marching toward my doom. More and more, I had a feeling Luca’s plan was going to fail and I was on my own to get out of this mess.

At the end of the room, Alessandro tugged on a wooden shelf to reveal a hidden door.

“Very nifty escape route,” Santino voiced his approval.

I had reservations about going inside it even if I knew that was part of the plan. I hesitated, my chest starting to feel heavy. I sucked in a lungful of air.

“Are you scared?” Santino asked with amusement.

“A little.” A lot, but it wasn’t what he thought.

Alessandro glared at me, then looked at Santino. “Get her in line. I hate wasting time.”

“You heard The Turk, *cara mia*,” he crooned and then patted my butt. “You’ll be fine.”

Without waiting for my reply, he dragged me through the secret portal. Lights came on. A landing at the bottom of three steps shifted to another set of seven steps before it angled into another staircase.

Our group of six followed Alessandro. I’d determined that two men belonged to Santino, while the other two worked for the Rossis. At the bottom of the stairs was a tunnel. When we were about to set foot into it, the unmistakable barrage of gunfire reached us.

“Luca, you son of a bitch,” Santino muttered, letting me go to peer back up the steps. “Should we—”

Alessandro yanked me behind him. “Go!”

I wasn’t prepared, but my feet took flight.

“Rossi, you asshole,” Santino roared. “Stop her.”

Shouting and more gunshots, louder this time, erupted behind me.

The plan. The plan. This wasn’t the plan, but I continued running.

It was dark in the tunnel, musky and wet. Some light bulbs strung along the wall were burned out and it seemed I was running blindly toward pitch blackness. All I could hear was my breathing, gunfire, and my footsteps.

I came to a fork in the tunnel that split into two. I glanced frantically from left to right, trying to decide which one I was supposed to take.

This wasn’t the plan.

Someone was supposed—

My feet moved to the right and stumbled over a lump on the ground, my hands shooting out to break the fall. Pain exploded from the heels of my hands and electrified my elbows. My knees scraped on the rough tunnel flooring.

I realized what I'd stumbled on.

A body.

Blood covered half its face.

A silent scream worked its way up my throat.

A figure emerged from the shadows, and even in the dim lighting, I recognized Santino's soldier from the nightclub. "Your uncle didn't think the boss trusted the Rossis completely, especially The Turk?"

I crab-walked backwards.

"Get up," he ordered. "Moretti has fucked up—"

A shot rang out and the man fell to the ground like a marionette whose strings were cut.

My eyes flew in the direction of the sound.

Alessandro showed up and helped me to my feet. "Come on. Santino retreated but he'll be back with more men."

His voice sounded strange.

"My uncle."

"Let's hope Tony got the message to the De Luccis. We need more men."

Voices came from behind.

We sprinted to the tunnel on the right, but Alessandro seemed to be struggling.

"Are you okay?"

He wheezed. "I'm fine. Don't slow down."

He was the one dragging me down, but I wasn't about to leave him. He tripped a bit and cursed.

"Where are you shot?" I asked, my voice as calm as I could manage.

“Leg. Bullet went through, but it’s bleeding like a motherfucker. It’s not the artery.” He answered the question in my mind. The tunnel shifted into an uphill climb and I could see moonlight shining through the bars of a gate.

“Alessandro, you fucker! Frankie is dead. You hear me?”

The voices came closer and closer.

“You betrayed your brother. Your family!”

We came to a gate covered in vines. From what Luca had briefed me I was going to exit into the graveyard of the run-down family chapel.

I gritted my teeth when the gate screeched on its hinges, but we managed to pry it open.

We had taken a few steps when he fell to one knee. “Dammit,” Alessandro groaned. “I’m going to slow you down. Follow—”

“I hope you’re not saying I leave you here.”

“Sera. One of us has to get out of here. Alive.”

“We’re both getting out,” I snapped. “Now get up.”

I grunted and shoved him up.

“You’re so bossy,” he muttered. “My phone is buzzing, can you get it? It’s—”

“Got it.” I slipped it out from inside of his suit and held it to his face then to his ear. A muffled voice came over the line.

“Graveyard of the church,” Alessandro said. “We’re crossing the roundabout. Almost to the gate.”

“Rossi!” Santino screamed.

A hail of lead pelted the ground beside us and gave wings to our feet. Alessandro grunted and cursed.

The shouting came closer. The gate was twenty feet away. We weren’t going to make it.

Alessandro went down, taking me with him.

He half pinned me to the ground, stealing my breath.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered.

I crawled out from under him, my heart sinking when Santino was upon us. Two of his men started kicking Alessandro.

“Stop it,” I shouted but Santino grabbed my hair and yanked me to stand.

“My runaway bride,” he sneered. “Now what will I do with a woman who not only stabbed me in the back once, but twice.” He looked me up and down. “You cunt. I was going to treat you like a queen. But there’s only one way to deal with treacherous women like you.”

He shoved me away. “On your knees.”

“No,” Alessandro choked.

“I’ll deal with you later,” Santino said before he returned his malevolent gaze to me. “I told you to get on your knees.” He paced a short distance back and forth, back and forth, wiping his mouth with his forearm.

I was frozen. Incapable of doing what I was told. My ears were clogged up and all I could think about was Matteo.

“Please,” I said, trying to buy time for whoever was coming with Tony.

I took a risk. I hoped Luca was able to save the former Galluzo boss’s daughter and that an alliance would be cemented to stop Santino. I hoped my uncle would avenge me. But I had a feeling it would be Matteo who would make it his mission to get rid of this scourge of the underworld.

“On your knees!” Santino screamed. He came forward and shoved me into position. He was rabid. My second betrayal had pushed him over the edge. He backed away again, muttering to himself, alternately pointing the gun at me and hammering the butt of it to his head. He was weighing the consequences that would rain down on him if he killed me.

I stole a glance at Alessandro.

He was fighting Santino’s men, roaring and cursing at everyone and trying to get to me. But he was injured, and they

overpowered him.

Santino stilled from his fight with himself as though he'd come to a decision. He raised his gun and pointed it at me.

"Luca will come for you," I whispered in one last-ditch effort to stay alive.

His crazed gaze met mine. "Not if I send him to hell first."

I closed my eyes, my fingers worrying over the bracelet of St. Rita like a talisman. A flash of light lit behind my eyelids.

I was dead.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Six

MATTEO

“We’re going to get there in time,” Nico said beside me. “But not if we get into a wreck.”

After the update from Tony, I drove my Jaguar around the mansion toward the old chapel. We headed to and circled the Rossi estate in Scarsdale after receiving confirmation that it was where Luca had taken Sera.

I glanced in my rearview mirror. Trevor was driving a Patrol loaded with Arrows and he was having trouble catching up with my Jaguar. Dom led another group to help Luca, who was holed up in one of the mansion rooms.

I took a sharp turn at top speed, trusting the tires to hug the curve. My brother, who was used to my driving, let out a string of profanities.

The gate of the church was up ahead.

“Is that—” Nico started. “Holy fuck. Drive faster.”

Fury ratcheted up inside me.

My wife was on her knees, Santino about to execute her.

I floored the gas.

The Jaguar slammed through the gates, and with the sound of metal on metal, the destruction of the car I love was eclipsed by an all-consuming compulsion to save my wife.

My life.

Santino was a dead man.

The bastard swung his gun at me and fired.

Bulletproof, motherfucker.

Realizing this too late, he raised his arms as if he could ward off the five thousand pounds of steel hurtling toward him.

I struck him, tossing his body like a doll thrown by a child having the end-all of tantrums.

My rage.

I was in the thrall of bloodlust, but my reflexes were honed, my senses sharp. I hit one of his crew with precision, missing Alessandro by scant inches. I jacked the brake, spinning the Jaguar in a one-eighty and rode the gas again. No speed was fast enough to get to my wife.

Trevor and the rest of the Arrows arrived.

The Jaguar screeched to a halt beside Sera and I scrambled out of the vehicle and slid to my knees in front of her.

She was sobbing into her hands.

“Sera.”

She raised her tear-streaked face as though finally realizing it was me.

“Matteo.” She fell into my arms. The agonizing crack in her voice when she said my name made me want to hit Santino with the Jaguar again.

And so we sat there for what seemed like an eternity, oblivious to the hustle of activity around us. The aggression that had spread like wildfire in my veins tempered with the need to be the protector, the safe haven for my wife who was crying in my arms with relief.

“I got you,” I whispered, locking her tightly. “I got you, baby. You’re safe.”



I had my arms around Sera as we walked into the De Lucci mansion. The Jaguar was wrecked in such a way that it wasn't drivable for long distances. Besides, the damage to its hood would call too much attention. The cleanup crew we had on standby brought a tow truck and removed all traces of our involvement before the police arrived.

It helped that the estate was large and secluded enough not to have nosy neighbors call nine-one-one when all the shooting started.

Frankie Rossi was dead. His death would be blamed on one of Santino's men, but from what I gleaned it was Luca who made the killing shot. The whole situation was still a blur and my wife was not coherent enough to tell us what happened. Sandro Rossi was involved but he was taken back to his territory and a mob doctor was called in.

The only person who had all the pieces was Luca.

He was standing in the foyer talking to Dad.

He rushed forward when he saw Sera, relief etched on his face.

Fuck no.

Rage that I'd kept on a simmer surged to a boil. I let go of my wife and met him head-on.

He stalled, realizing I was seething with aggression. "Now, wait a minute, De Lucci."

I punched him across the face with my left hand.

"Sera almost died, you motherfucker," I roared.

Dad came between us and told me, "Don't mess up your other hand."

"Matteo, don't," Sera said softly, touching my shoulder.

I was breathing hard for long seconds, jaw clenched, gaze laser-focused on Luca.

Finally, I one-armed Sera to my side. I couldn't last a few seconds without touching her. "How could you risk her! Sera is meant to be protected. Not used as a pawn."

Luca's eyes flashed, then he dropped his gaze to fix the sleeves of his suit. "Don't talk to me about using her as a pawn, De Lucci. You did the same."

"I didn't put her deliberately in harm's way."

"Debatable," he sneered, this time pinning me with a disdainful stare. "This whole circus started because you stole her from Santino—"

"Why, you—" I took a step toward him.

Sera hung on to me and pleaded, "Enough. Everyone is fine. Santino is dead. We're okay."

"But I admit," Luca continued, "Sera is better off with you."

"Don't choke on your words." Dad clapped a hand onto Moretti's shoulder. The other man stiffened.

"I don't like being touched," he clipped.

Dad shook his head but remained unperturbed.

"Stop being an asshole," my wife told her uncle, extricating herself from my embrace and into the arms of the man I wanted to bury. "Now give me a hug."

For a few seconds, I saw the veneer of ruthless mafia boss slip from Luca's face as he tightly squeezed his niece. "I'm glad you're okay. I don't know if I could forgive myself if anything happened to you."

Then why risk her? I kept those words to myself. A headache was starting to pound at my temples. To function with precision, I took a cocktail of painkillers plus Adderall, and they were starting to wear off.

"We need to debrief. We have to do it now." Luca let go of Sera and transformed back into crime boss. "I have to go back to Chicago. Word of the Rossi shake-up would have reached

them now and I have to calm the family. Natalya Conte will remain here.”

“Natalya Conte?” I asked. “You have her?”

“Yes.” Luca looked around at the people milling around. “Not here.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s in the study with Ava,” Dad said. “She’s getting looked over by our physician.” As if on cue, Mom appeared. “Doc said she’s fine. She didn’t suffer any physical abuse.” Expression tight, she stared at Luca. She wasn’t as diplomatic as Dad and still pissed at Sera’s uncle for the chaos he instigated. “You got to her in time.”

“Of course I did.”

“At the expense of Sera,” I gritted.

Luca narrowed his eyes at me before turning to Dad. “Let’s talk.”

“I’m all for that,” Dad said. “But it’s Matteo who you have to explain this shit to.”

My dad’s deference to me and my place in the family finally sunk into Luca’s stubbornness. Unlike before though, the thought that I was half Italian didn’t bother me. Luca’s beef with me was because I was competition for his niece’s affection and loyalty. He looked at me coldly. “Lead the way.”

I put my arm around my wife again and headed toward the study. Dom was already inside talking to a woman who looked familiar. Natalya Conte was the only daughter of Vincenzo Conte, half brother of Gustavo and the kingpin of the Galluzo mafia before Santino sent him into hiding.

“She was with Frankie all along?” I asked.

“Santino wasn’t only here for Sera,” Luca said. “He snatched Natalya from the NYU campus before he moved on Vincenzo.”

“And why are you involved?” I asked. “And why involve Sera?”

“She was my only bargaining chip. Santino wanted Sera as a form of revenge.”

A growl vibrated in my chest.

“I admit my uncle’s methods are radical,” Sera hurriedly put in. “But I agreed. Frankie Rossi was known to be abusive. There were always rumors circulating how his first wife died. How they had to disguise the huge bruises on her face. How he paid off the cops so there wouldn’t be any questioning. I couldn’t let that happen to another woman.”

And there it was. Luca played on my wife’s weakness. It pissed me off as well as made me feel impotent to get mad at her. But it was not her weakness, it was Sera’s strength and I admired her for it. And I admired her more after I spent time at the soup kitchen. This was an intrinsic part of my wife’s compassion, proof how far she would go for the protection of women.

It made me love her more even when it made me lose my mind that she staked her life on it.

“I understand.” I smiled at her faintly but raised condemning eyes at her uncle. “But I still don’t understand risking your niece for her.” I looked at Natalya. “No offense to you.”

The woman in question stared at the floor and I felt like an asshole, but I wasn’t pissed at her, just Sera’s uncle.

“Vincenzo asked me for help.” Luca walked to Natalya. His back was to me and I couldn’t see his expression, but Natalya gazed up at Luca in a rapt and dreamy gaze that was like a piece of a puzzle. The puzzle pieces fell into place faster after he picked up her hand and kissed the back of her knuckles.

“I’m so thankful to you for saving me,” Natalya whispered.

Holy hell, couldn’t she see that Luca was a wolf in sheep’s clothing? My jaw clenched.

After a few more words of comfort to Natalya, he stood and faced us. “Santino was humiliated when Sera rejected him.

Naturally, the Galluzo was humiliated too. We would have worked out recompense if he hadn't acted unilaterally. I felt responsible for the bloodshed that tore through that organization. I gave Sera the choice to help."

"You took her by force," I snarled, getting worked up again.

"I'm not going to explain to you the fucked-up situation you left Chicago to handle," Luca said. "I was more than within my rights after you divorced my niece. I would take her with me now if she hadn't convinced me that her place is with you." His mouth tightened. "I'm respecting her choice. Don't make me regret it."

The fucker. My fist itched to rearrange his face, but Sera squeezed my hand in warning.

I didn't have much to defend myself with and Luca knew it.

He glanced at his watch. "I need to return to Chicago ASAP." His gaze fell on Sera. "Look after Natalya."

After Sera and her uncle hugged once more and said their good-byes, Luca nodded to everyone else in the room and walked to the door.

"I'll see you out," Dom said.

Boss-to-boss fuckery again.

"Fuck me," I muttered as the door closed behind them.

After Luca left, Mom and Sera sensed we needed to discuss the situation without Natalya in the room, so they led her out of the study.

When the women were gone, I turned to Dad and Nico. "You get the sense Luca is contemplating a marriage to Vincenzo's daughter?"

"He's going to chew her alive," Nico agreed.

Dom returned to the room. "I just heard back from Sandro's crew. He's going to be okay barring complications overnight."

“How about the remaining Rossi soldiers? Wouldn’t they try to whack him since he betrayed Frankie?”

“You wouldn’t believe how many of them didn’t like Frankie,” he said. “The ones loyal to Sandro are keeping overwatch, but one of you might want to go check on him.”

“Why?” Dad narrowed his eyes.

“Because someone told Bianca, and from what I gathered, she left Cambridge twenty minutes ago and is heading straight to Harlem.”

“Goddammit.” Dad looked at Nico who sighed.

“On it,” my brother said and exited the study.

“This is becoming a clusterfuck,” I gritted.

My cousin eyed me. “It’s being handled. Our business is how to address the blowback from you running Santino over with your car.”

I glared at my cousin. “He was going to shoot Sera.”

“I’m not saying it wasn’t justified, but Santino has loyalists in the Galluzo that might retaliate.”

“Let them come,” I snarled. “We’ll be ready.”

Dom cut a glance at Dad. “This is where Luca could help. You all caught on about his interest in Natalya?”

“It’s hard to miss,” Dad said.

“He would have sway with the Galluzo leadership. Once Vincenzo is reinstated, having Luca as a son-in-law and given his reputation, it’s going to go a long way for this not to cause trouble for us.”

“You’ve contained the details of Santino’s death. There’s no reason for it to get out,” I said.

Dom said, “We always want insurance.”

“By committing Natalya to a lifetime with Luca?” I asked incredulously.

“If Luca is that bad, you think Sera wouldn’t say anything? Your wife seems to have a soft spot for abused women.”

“She does.”

“Don’t you think she’ll be the first one to stand up against Luca if he doesn’t treat Natalya right?”

I couldn’t argue with him there. It still didn’t mean I liked it. Natalya didn’t look much older than Bianca, who was twenty-one.

“Who’s going to head the Rossi crime family now?”

Dom named a few prospects.

“How about Sandro?”

“He might be ostracized after this.”

“Does he even care? He’s been banished before and he has his own territory in Harlem.”

“Maybe it’s time to recruit him into the Syndicate,” Dom said.

“Let’s not be too hasty with this,” Dad said. He flicked a gaze to me. Sandro had been close to the family through Bianca but they had a falling out.

I was done sticking my nose in anyone’s business, but the Archer Syndicate was mine. “I agree with Dad. Let’s see where his headspace is first before we make rash decisions. After all, he played a role in his brother’s death.”

My hand throbbed and I hissed when a stab of pain shot through my knuckles. They almost felt like they’d doubled in size.

“How is it?” Dad asked, nodding to my hand.

“It’ll be fine.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t break anything,” Dom said.

“I’m only regretting not breaking Luca’s face.” I exhaled in annoyance. “Are we done here? I want to check on my wife.”

“Wife? She divorced you.” Dom had the audacity to point out.

I invaded his space. “She’ll always be my wife, got it?”

Dom's smile was all teeth. "Don't fuck it up this time."

CHAPTER

Thirty-Seven

SERA

I couldn't wait to strip off the grit and grime of the night. The sneakers and sweatpants lay in a heap on the tiled floor. I wondered if there was an incinerator in this mansion's basement.

Standing in the shower, I wished it could scald off the images of the night from my retinas, of Santino holding a gun to my head, of the body in the tunnel with half a bloody face. Was there even a face left underneath all that blood? I shivered even as hot water sluiced all over my skin. As much as I'd been embroiled in family business, it was the first time I'd been almost executed.

I'd always wondered what I would do if I knew I was going to die. Now I knew. I would close my eyes. Not because I was a coward, but because I wanted to see the face of the person I loved the most, one last time.

Matteo.

I wanted to see the brilliant blue of his eyes reassuring me that it was going to be okay.

I thought I saw my life flash before me.

It was the headlights of the Jaguar.

Matteo wrecked his beloved car to save me.

The thought made my knees weak.

A need to see him had me speeding through my shower. Steam followed me out of the enclosure and kept me in a cocoon of warmth as I towel-dried my hair. Natalya was put in my room and I could only grab a few essentials before I entered Matteo's bedroom.

Still, I stole a T-shirt from his drawer and put that on. I had no idea what I was doing except I didn't want to be away from Matteo for another night.

I sprinted out of the bathroom and skidded to a halt. Matteo was sitting at the edge of the bed.

He was bent forward, elbows to his knees, glowering at me.

I gulped. "Mom and I put Natalya in my room."

He straightened and rose from the bed, stalking toward me. "Your room?" His eyes flared. "Sera, are you here because you're thankful I saved you?"

I raised my hand and cupped his face. He turned toward it, pressing a kiss against it briefly before rubbing his bristled jaw against my palm. He reminded me of a wounded beast seeking comfort in its mate. All the love I had for Matteo surged inside me as I said, "I closed my eyes when Santino pointed the gun at me."

A strangled noise worked up his throat. "Baby..."

"It wasn't because I was scared...well, I was...terrified in fact...but the last thing I wanted to see on this earth was you." The last few words trampled on each other with the rush to get out. Tears rolled down my cheeks and my voice cracked. "I love you..."

I never finished my declaration. Matteo captured my lips with a groan vibrating deep in his chest. We tumbled on top of the bed with an urgency that rivaled our first time in Maine. He rose above me, arms braced on either side of my head, his hand shaking as it cleared the wet hair from my face. "I can't be gentle."

His voice vibrated with an undertone of desperation.

“I don’t want gentle. I want to feel alive.”

He didn’t say any more. He shoved my knees apart, leaned slightly to free his erection, then he was inside me.

I gasped at the fullness. I could feel the tip of his cock touch my womb. He hiked one of my legs higher and he started pounding inside me. Pressure built below my pelvis.

“You okay?” he gritted, his eyes dark with torment even as he drove deeper inside me.

I could only nod and moan.

When his fingers circled my clit, I exploded, crying out as pleasure pulsed strong and endless. But it was more than the physical. So much more. It involved all our pent-up angst from the past few weeks, dreams that crashed and burned, then soared with renewed hope only to be plagued by the near tragedy of almost losing each other.

And as Matteo’s eyes locked with mine, I felt another wave building and whispered, “With me.”

He nodded and gave me a quick, devouring kiss before he took us both over the edge into bliss.

A few minutes later, we lay spent and exhausted, breathing hard. A sheen of sweat covered our bodies and my hair was a wet tangle across his chest. I drew mindless circles over his skin.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he said finally. “I still don’t get Luca.”

I sighed. Obviously, he was still seething with the drastic steps my uncle had taken. Luca was hard to explain. He was more of a notion than someone whose existence could be summarized in a few sentences. “Unless you’ve grown up with a Luca in your life, you’ll never understand him, but he loves me.”

“With what he did—he had no right to think he was better for you than I was.”

“I think he finally accepted it,” I said softly with a hint of sadness and a sense of loss, but I was more overcome by a

sense of freedom. “Luca has to think about the family as a whole. He equates love with loyalty.” I had paid my dues and paid it nearly with my life. I had broken free of my misguided responsibility toward the Chicago crime family. Being around the De Luccis, I could see how they loved and supported each other unconditionally. They were allowed to make mistakes and learn from them in their own time. I wanted that very much to be my future. A future with Matteo.

“I’ll always put you first,” he said.

“I know.”

“I can’t change the way you are, your need to help women in need.” Matteo exhaled his resignation. “But please think about me too and the children we’re going to have.”

Jolted by the unexpected statement because it eerily reflected my own sentiments, I whispered, “Children?”

“Our future.”

“I can live with that.”

“You better.”



Matteo

“I don’t know what to say.”

Mrs. Mancini stared at me from across the conference table of one of the smaller conference rooms at De Lucci Transnational. Nico, Jonas, and Sera were with us to discuss the Mancini Winery’s lease on a second life, probably its third.

“Don’t thank me.” I nodded to Sera. “Thank my wife.” Technically, she was my ex-wife. It had been three weeks since we got rid of Santino. Two weeks to get Vincenzo back at the helm of the Galluzo and an acting Rossi boss installed that assured a truce with the De Lucci crime family. It had

been a week since our divorce papers were finalized but I will always call Sera my wife.

The older woman smiled at Sera with appreciation. “Thank you for coming out to the winery and inspecting our operations. My sons are looking forward to this new direction.”

“There’s still a lot of work to be done,” Sera said. “But once they come home, then the real work begins.”

It turned out, the choice of the Mancini boys to abandon their legacy was because of their mother’s refusal to change anything. One of her sons was a chef at a renowned Manhattan restaurant, while the other was an investment banker I knew. It was a team effort by our family. Sera and Mom talked to the chef son, while Nico and I took on the other.

The tasting room would be moved to the Italian villa that was their residence to take advantage of its architecture and charm, while another section would become the restaurant. Plans for the old tasting room hadn’t been solidified yet, but Sera was saying it was the ideal place for an outdoor wedding venue instead of depending on a tent.

Mrs. Mancini smiled wider. “Know tradition, embrace change.” She stood, and we all did the same. “Thank you for making me understand this. This is great news to take back to my employees given that Thanksgiving is in a few days.”

She embraced Sera, and for the first time ever, hugged me too. “You are a good man, Matteo De Lucci,” she said. “I’m sorry for everything I said to you that meant otherwise.”

“No. I only became better because I had a good woman at my side.”

After more good-byes and hugs were exchanged, she left. We all looked at each other and shook our heads.

“That was weird,” Jonas muttered. “She didn’t demand her café au lait.”

“Maybe she’s learning humility,” I said.

Nico was scrolling through his phone and looked up. “Well, we’ve got more of those coming.”

I sighed.

A few hours later, we were back at the mansion. This was turning out to be a big day for Sera. Gustavo was presenting her with the shares. The old man had been worse for wear after he suffered under the hands of Santino’s soldiers and wasn’t able to travel immediately. But after he was cleared by the doctor, he couldn’t wait to fly out of Italy to formally turn over the fifteen percent stake in Conte Enterprise to Sera.

“I don’t want him to feel obligated,” she had said.

I didn’t want that either, but I pointed out to her that after risking her own life to save him, she deserved it.

The turnover was quick and painless. After documents were signed, we all retreated to the sitting room for drinks.

As expected, Daniel and Ivy came with Gustavo. I hadn’t seen my friend since the day I rescued Sera. Personally, I wished he’d stay away, but maybe it was time to find closure. He needed to know his place in Sera’s life. Also present were Dad, Nico, Uncle Paulie, and Dom. Luca attended by way of video conference. He was in Italy to iron out details of a Galluzo-Chicago alliance. My eyes sought out Sera. She was with Ivy and talking animatedly to Gustavo. There was no mistaking the fondness in the old man’s eyes. Gustavo had been restored to a position of status within the Galluzo organization, thanks to Luca’s intervention in stopping Santino. Between Sera and me, we would have a controlling stake in the olive oil company. Luca having sway with the Galluzo leadership meant we had another way to keep an eye on the organization.

I walked over to the bar to pour myself another scotch. I felt a presence at my side and I didn’t need to glance over to know who it was. “Scotch, Daniel?”

“Damn, I wish I knew how you did that,” he said. “Have eyes in the back. And...sure.”

He held out his tumbler and I poured him two fingers before I did the same to mine.

“You wanted to talk to me?” I asked.

“This cold war needs to end,” he said. “We’re business partners and Ivy is best friends with Sera.”

“I have no problem with it as long as you know Sera is mine.”

“Look,” Daniel said. “I gave this some thought. I care about Sera a lot, and what I feel for her...”

My eyes narrowed.

“Dammit, De Lucci, would you stop being a jealous asshole?” he hissed. “I care about Sera. Get over it. That said, she’s yours, okay? Just don’t hurt her again.”

I took a sip of my scotch. More than a few pairs of eyes had taken interest in me and Daniel including wary ones from Sera and Ivy.

“I don’t intend to,” I said curtly.

“Good.” He let out a breath and held out his hand. “So, friends?”

“Friends.” We shook on it, then paused to give each other a look before we smiled wryly and dragged the other in for a hug and slap on the back.

I imagined the collective breaths of relief around the room. Did they think Daniel and I would devolve into a fighting match.

“So, are you asking Sera to marry you again?” Daniel asked with a sly grin.

“Count on it.”

Epilogue

MATTEO

I always awakened before Sera. For a few minutes in the mornings, I could watch her sleep. It gave me comfort that I could guard her while she had more time to dream—hopefully the peaceful kind. She had nightmares of that night Santino held a gun to her head, but they'd grown less frequent. The last one she had was last week. She never remembered them when she woke up. I just knew it was about Santino because the thrashing around and sobbing “no” had never happened before that night. I wanted her to wake up knowing I would always be by her side, watching over her. That she would feel safe. And maybe, I never wanted to feel so helpless again. In a way, I suffered my own trauma of almost losing her, a taste of what life would be like without Sera.

Easy. There was no life without Sera.

She was my life.

Hopefully her subconscious was slowly burying away that event. Mom once said dreams were the mind's way of healing itself from unwanted feelings and memories. Because isn't that always why they say to sleep on it?

Sera started to stir.

When she opened her eyes, she smiled. “Are we going?”

“Of course we are,” I said.

The week after Thanksgiving, Sera and I returned to Maine. We arrived at the compound last night. The Archers and the De Lucci crime family had a meeting where we finally agreed that all threats to our members were over. So, unlike last time, we didn't need guards.

Sera and I were staying a week before we rejoined the family for Christmas.

"But it's so cold." She burrowed her nose into the pillow.

"You were so gung-ho to watch the sunrise last night."

"What's the temperature?"

I grabbed my phone to look. "Thirty degrees right now."

She didn't say anything. I chuckled and offered words of encouragement. "I'll keep you warm."

She still didn't say anything.

"I know you're just pretending to be asleep." I climbed over her to get to her side of the floor, then I bent and scooped her up. "Come on, baby."

She groaned and nuzzled my chest. It was going to be one of those mornings.

Sera, it seemed, had sleep inertia during chilly weather. She was like a bear in hibernation. But no worries, I was at her service.

I grinned as I positioned her at the sink. "Gargle."

"I hate you," she mumbled.

"No, you don't." I walked over to our suitcase, which we had yet to unpack, and picked out some clothes for her. I wasn't complaining. I loved pampering her. I loved stripping the clothes off her both in the morning when I'm forcing her to wake up before she's ready, and when I'm about to fuck her blind. My groin stirred as I remembered our sex marathon the night before. Maybe that was why she was worn out.

Couldn't say I wasn't smug as fuck.

After I got her into her clothes, I pointed a finger at her. “Don’t crawl back into bed.”

“You’re like a drill sergeant.”

I smirked. “I’ll go make coffee.”

Sera seemed more awake by the time she strode into the kitchen and I had all our necessities packed including the all-important thermos of caffeine.

“I think I’m excited again.”

“Good, baby.”

Leading her out to the garage, I bundled her into the Suburban. My Jaguar was sitting at the mansion garage, still as wrecked as it had been a month ago. I wasn’t sure what I was doing with it, and frankly I didn’t care. My world had revolved around Sera and tying up loose ends. Besides, my priorities had changed.

Sunrise wasn’t until six forty-five. We had fifteen minutes to make it, so I navigated the SUV slowly through the unpaved road so she wouldn’t be cold for too long when we got there.

The horizon was already splashed with orange by the time we made it to the cliff. I helped Sera from the passenger side and sat at the tailgate and waited for the sunrise, huddled together. I brought a blanket to wrap around us. The ocean was cast in purple. A cruise ship was passing through.

“You okay?” I asked.

She glanced up at me. “I’m fine.”

Our breaths formed wisps of vapor in the cold. Sera had lowered her travel cup of coffee and had tucked her hands into my sides.

“I forgot the gloves,” she murmured.

“I’m sorry, baby,” I said.

“You’re treating me like a child,” she chided. “It’s not your fault you forgot. And it’s not your responsibility.”

“Oh, I didn’t forget,” I said.

“What?”

The sun started to clear the horizon. Perfect.

I untangled myself from Sera and she started mumbling, but her protestations cut off when she realized what I was doing.

“Matteo,” she whispered.

I dropped to one knee in front of her. “I didn’t do this properly before, but I sure as hell hope I’m doing it right this time.”

She wrapped the blanket around her, golden rays lighting her face. *Fuck, she’s glorious.*

“I can’t think of any place else that would be more perfect.” I extracted the ring from my pocket. There was no box. Just the five-carat solitaire I asked Mom and Bianca to help me pick out. “Our divorce came through two weeks ago, but I couldn’t wait to make you mine again.”

She gave a watery laugh. “This is crazy.”

My lips tipped up. “Is it? If it is, will you be crazy with me, because, baby, I’m crazy in love with you. I’ve never stopped calling you my wife because for me, that time I said those vows, I meant it. But I get it. We didn’t have a strong foundation. We’ve been through so much...”

“We have...and you wrecked your Jaguar for me.”

I gave a choked laugh. “Baby, I’m serious here.”

“I’m being serious. You loved that car, Matteo.”

“I’m telling you now, it’s just a car.”

She looked at me dubiously.

“Now, will you let me finish?” My lips twitched. She was messing with me. Was I nervous? Not really. Fuck, what if she said no? I took in a deep breath.

“You’re missing the sunrise,” she said softly.

I stared at her. “No, I’m not.” And I meant it. There would be no sunrise without her. My sun rose and set with her.

Her mouth trembled before she burst out, “Don’t make me cry.”

Chuckling lightly, I held up the ring. The diamond caught fire in the sun’s rays. “Seraphina Moretti De Lucci.” She was still a De Lucci after the divorce. Another reason for me to be a smug bastard which in no way made me complacent. I’d learned my lesson. “Will you marry me? Again?”

“Oh, Matteo, it’s beautiful.” Her hands reached out.

I held the ring away. “Is that a yes?”

She bit her lower lip, her eyes focused on the ring, before she lifted them to me with all solemnness. I couldn’t read her expression. Was she weighing her options now that she was about to commit to me again?

“Baby,” I said, my confidence stuttering. “You know there’s no escaping me—”

“Yes,” she breathed.

I wasted no time slipping the ring on her finger and I hauled her out of the SUV, so I could kiss her senseless. When we broke apart, I growled, “You were teasing me, right?”

“You know I was.” She laughed lightly.

“You’re going to pay for that,” I muttered, capturing her lips again. Our bodies molded to each other, and heat raced through my veins.

After a while, she broke the kiss this time, saying, “I’m going to enjoy paying for it.”

“Oh, you will,” I promised and started to remove her coat.

Her eyes flared. “Matteo...”

“Why do you think I brought a blanket?”

“It’s cold!”

“I’ll keep you warm.”



Sera

“Oh my God,” I breathed.

Matteo collapsed beside me. “That was fucking fantastic.”

“Yes, but now I’m too hot.”

“You’re always hot.”

I giggled. “That’s not what I meant. Turn off the heat.”

He groaned. “Woman, you just sucked the life out of me, I don’t have the energy.”

My man could be so dramatic. I rolled to all fours, crawled between the console, unconcerned about my nakedness, and lowered the heat. I spied my phone and grabbed it. Ivy would never forgive me if I didn’t send her a picture of the ring at least.

I knee-walked back to the tailgate and opened the door. Freezing air rushed in and I heard Matteo curse. “You’re going to catch a cold.”

“That’s a fallacy.”

I hurriedly took a picture and sent it to Ivy.

“Come here,” Matteo growled. He slammed the back door shut and we dove under the blankets again.

“Turn up the heat.” I laughed as I lit our little cocoon with my phone. Matteo nuzzled my neck.

“I’ll keep you warm.”

“That seems to be your standard line.” My breath hitched and I erupted in a full-body shudder when he kissed the pulse that got me so sensitive.

He started a trail down my body, getting on top of me, my legs spread for him to get settled in between.

But I was distracted with a voicemail from Luca. I hadn’t heard from him in a while.

I pressed play and put the phone to my ear.

“Are you seriously listening to your messages right now?”

I would have laughed if my uncle’s message hadn’t caught me off guard. “What the fuck, Luca.”

Matteo, hearing the alarm in my voice, made his way back up my body.

I stared at him. “Luca beat us to it.”

His brows furrowed. “What?”

“He’s gotten engaged to Natalya.”

“How the fuck did that happen?”

Matteo wasn’t the only one baffled. It made me so mad. Natalya was still staying with us at the mansion. “He’s flying back to the U.S. tomorrow and straight for Manhattan.”

“Does Natalya know she’s engaged?”

“What time is it in Italy right now?” I was getting worked up. I was going to give my uncle a piece of my mind.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Matteo plucked the phone from my hand, lifted the blanket, and tossed it on the front seat.

“Are you being high-handed again, Mr. De Lucci?” I sighed.

“Right now, your duty is to your husband, wife,” he murmured. “We’ll deal with your uncle later.”

“I can still be annoyed.”

“I can help with that.”

I smiled and linked my arms around his neck. My fiancé soon to be my husband for the second time always found ways to make me happy. I was his obsession as he was mine.

“You know...” My voiced cracked. “You’ve helped me realize my hopes and dreams. I couldn’t think of anyone else I’d love to spend a lifetime with.”

“That’s good,” he said. “Because you’re spending forever with me.”

A black curl dangled from his forehead, and I remembered the first time I saw him out of a suit. I didn't know it then, but it was my future walking toward me. I lovingly combed the errant hair back in place, raking his scalp in the process. He gave a rumble of satisfaction, reminding me of a contented lion. "How could I not after everything you've done to get us here?"

"It was worth it, but I don't think I can stand the torture of not having you in my bed a second time." His eyes searched mine. "Tell me you love me, wife."

"I love you, Matteo De Lucci."

His eyes gleamed. "Now, where were we?"

Thank you for reading!

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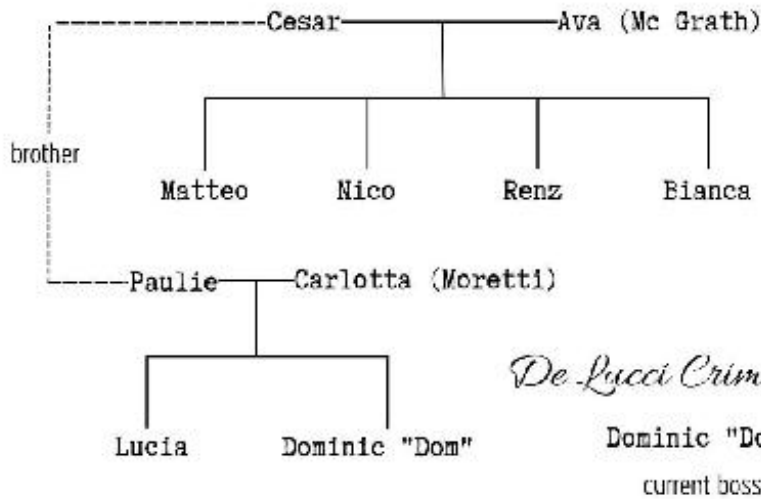
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author tremendously.

thank you,

Victoria

De Lucci Family (legitimate front)



De Lucci Crime Family

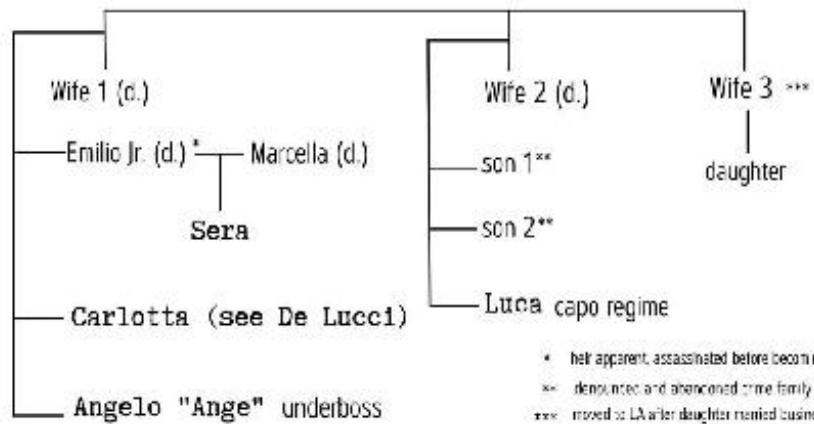
Moretti Crime Family

Luca

current boss

(previous administration)

Emilio Sr. (d.) boss



- * her apparent, assassinated before becoming boss
- ** denounced and abandoned crime family
- *** moved to LA after daughter married businessman

Afterword

Having not published a book in a year, I was nervous about releasing *Scorned Heir* into the world. First, it was a different sub-genre than what my readers are used to. After mulling the direction of my new series, I've determined that my over-the-top, jealous and possessive heroes are perfect for the billionaire-mafia tropes. I needed time to create and envision the series, the world, and the characters, as well as give you a consistent publishing schedule. As of this release, I've already written books two and three and they are in the final stages of manuscript preparation.

All this wouldn't be possible without a fantastic team behind me.

Becca, *The Fairy Plot Mother*. Our weekly calls were invaluable to my new writing process. You kept me accountable. You asked me questions and challenged the direction of my characters and plot. I couldn't have completed my book within my self-imposed deadline without you.

Erica of *Erica Edits*. Thank you for polishing my manuscript without changing my voice. Working with you has been a joy and I appreciate your suggestions for a cleaner manuscript. I also appreciate your professionalism in all things.

Sue, thank you for a fantastic beta read. I know Matteo and Sera were messier than my other couples, but you asked for a satisfying grovel. Lol. I always appreciate your eagle-eye. I also love our net streaming chats from *Succession* to *Emily in Paris*.

Amy, thank you for slogging through my pre-edited draft. Your insights and suggestions are terrific and only make the story better.

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To my Very Important Paige readers. Thank you for your support in all facets of my authoring. You are the best readers and always patient and respectful of my writing process.

I also have to mention the reader groups I've been active in. Obsessive Possessive Stalkers and Over-the-top alphas, Betrayal and Grovel – A Romance Heartache, and Jealous/Possessive Hero groups, you feed my reading addictions!

To the amazing world of booktokkers and bookstagrammers. Thank you for your support of my books and my ever-growing TBR.

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Rogue Protectors

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* All series books can be read as standalone